終末なにしてますか？忙しいですか？救ってもらっていいですか？**Volume 3**

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「自分では、ちゃんと
やさぐれてるつもりなんですけどね」
わくわくしていましたよ。
これから何が起こるんだろう、この世界にはどんな楽しいことが待ってるんだろう、そんな気持ちが、胸いっぱいに広がっていました。
え、何ですかその顔。
発生した直後の気持ちの話、でしたよね。聞かれたから答えただけなんですが。
そんなに似合いませんか？
私だって、発生した時からこんな、面白くもない性格だったわけじゃないです。
あなたにもあったでしょう、蒼い空とかまだ読んでいない本とか、そういったものに理由もなく広がりを感じたころが。
あれはきっと、ただそれだけの気持ち。
私が私になる前、前世の誰かが、世界に残した未練の形——
ただ、それだけの話です。

未来はいつだって、俺たちの手の中だ。
そこからこぼれ落ちたものを、
俺たちは過去と呼んでいる。

誰かのロマンは、誰かの現実だ。
俺たちは、そうやって、
お互いに繋がってる。
グリック

Chapter 1: Before That Battle Begins

The night before the final battle.

At least spend these final moments with the people you want to meet one last time. The group of heroes gathered to defeat Elq Harksten, a ‘Visitor’ officially recognized as an enemy of the Church of Holy Light, was temporarily released for that reason.

“... so why did you come and visit me?” the teacher said with a grumpy face.

“I mean, I don’t have a family or a boyfriend, sooo…” Leila

answered with a laugh.

The inn her master was staying at was situated in the 6th District of the Imperial Capital, in a slum far away from the knight patrol routes, in an area with a reputation for rampant pickpocketing. The floorboards creaked loudly with every step, the dust covered fireplace hardly seemed usable, and the only lamp in the room was almost out of oil. The price of five silver coins for this dump of a place seemed quite steep, but the goat design on the sign out front did carry a good amount of value by itself. In other words, anyone that stayed at the inn would be under the protection of the 'Whisperers', the organization which had the largest influence in the area.

"I tried thinking of someone who was like a relative, and you were the only one who popped up. What a lonely life I live…" Leila let out another forced laugh.

Her master was a man full of mysteries. At first glance, he just looked like a skinny man of questionable age. If you tried, you could convince yourself that he was anywhere from thirty to sixty years old. Leila first met him over ten years ago, but his appearance had hardly changed the whole time. In fact, he even seemed to be getting younger.

It didn't just stop with his age, though: his birth and upbringing were both shrouded in mystery. He also somehow mastered a wide variety of combat techniques and acquired knowledge that could rival that of all the scholars of the capital put together.

The master sighed overdramatically. "What happened to your beloved senior disciple?"

"Willem? He went back to Gomag to see Aly and the others."

"Then why didn't you go with him? If his adorable junior disciple asked I'm sure he couldn't refuse."

"Ahahaha, your jokes are as bad as ever, master." Leila chuckled, but soon frowned. "If I asked that idiot such a thing, not only would he not refuse, he would actually try to treat me like family."

"Probably. Something wrong with that?"

"The world is on the verge of destruction." A short silence. "A place you so desperately want to return home to, but you already know you will never be able to. We all have a place like that. You, me, all my predecessors. It's almost like it's one of the minimum requirements to become a Regal Brave. So it would be bad if I had a home that I *could* return to, wouldn't it?"

“Well, it’s not actually a rule.”

“But still, I was recognized by the Church of Holy Light as the unhappiest person in the world. That’s why I get to be a Regal Brave, isn’t it? So if I suddenly became the happiest person in the world, I would probably lose my privileges. Of course, with my overflowing power and talent I could still get pretty far in battle, but not against the Visitors.”

“You can’t just suddenly become the happiest person in the world…”

“No, I think I could. Right now I’m just lonely.” A brief silence. “You once said. That no one can keep up with the strength of the Regal Braves, so they will always be isolated. You were way off, you know? Right now, I’m so strong I even scare myself, but there’s this guy who won’t stop chasing me, even though he knows he can’t catch up. If I pause even a little and turn around, he’s always right there. Like what kind of bad horror story is this? He just keeps chasing and chasing, refusing to give up. He won’t leave me alone.”

“Do you hate him that much?” the master asked.

Leila stared off into space, groaning as she searched for words to describe Willem.

“Hm, I guess. I really do hate him a lot. Even though he’s grown up he’s still a child inside, even though he’s studying all these things he still does everything by brute force, even though he met you just a little before me he acts like the senior disciple, even though he was cute before now he’s too tall, even though he’s pretty aware he’s completely oblivious to girls’ feelings…”

“So mean…”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. Leila thought that of herself too. She was grossly over exaggerating on some of her complaints, but what else could she do? If she didn’t, Leila Asprey wouldn’t be able to go on hating him. And the very moment she stopped hating him, she would probably fall for him.

Willem Kumesh was the type of person who couldn’t stand it when the people around him weren’t happy. Moreover, he didn’t discriminate. If someone, no matter who, told him they were lonely and asked him to stay beside them, he would obey, no question about it -- even if that someone happened to be Leila Asprey. He might make a sour face, but he would still do it.

And if that happened, the great emptiness in her heart would be filled. She would have to throw away the title of unhappiest person in the world. And then, the Church of Holy Light would begin searching for the next person fit to become a Regal Brave. And

then… she didn't want to think about what would happen after that.

"Well, it wouldn't be very kind to turn away an apprentice who came all the way to see me on their final night, even if you did choose me by process of elimination." Scratching his head, her master grabbed the coat hanging off of the beat up chair. "This room's not very good for having a long talk, so let's go somewhere with some food. Tell me some stories of your senior disciple's valorous deeds."

"Sure. Do you know any good places around here?"

"Don't get your hopes up. The restaurants that serve decent food are a minority." He creaked his way over to the wobbly door and put his hand on the knob. "By the way, Leila. How did you know where I was? I don't believe I've been reporting my recent movements to the Alliance."

"Hm? Oh, well it was a lot of trouble."

Before tonight, Leila had no knowledge of her master's whereabouts. Honorary knight of Old Dineo and former 18th generation Regal Brave. Such a famous person would surely have a hard time traveling around unnoticed by the public. But meeting her master here in this inn was pure coincidence.

She had been searching for someone else: a dangerous character leading the remnants of the anti Imperial Capital religious organization they had crushed just a few days ago. This inn was one of the places that popped up in her investigation. And inside the inn, she just so happened to run into the master who she hadn't been able to find, no matter how hard she searched.

-- Leila wanted to believe it was just a coincidence. She wanted to blindly believe the people important to her. But she was not naive enough nor irresponsible enough to push all doubts under the rug in this situation.

"Oh yeah, just remembered. There's something I wanted to ask you," she said.

"Hm? What is it?"

Leila took a deep breath, and let it all out. After calming her mind, she asked, "The current leader of True World… it's you, isn't it, master?"

The man standing in the doorway to the dim, dilapidated room slowly turned around. He never responded with words, but there was no need to. Seeing the hints of caution and suspicion in his eyes was enough for Leila to confirm the accuracy of her guess.

This time, being right didn't feel too good.

Chapter 2: Even If the Sun Will One Day Fall

Part 1: Far Below the Starry Sky

Long ago, life flourished on the land. Trees grew into magnificent forests, beasts roamed freely, and many races starting

with the Emnetwyte found their own ways of life. That prosperity was suddenly broken by what would later be called the ‘17 Beasts’. They appeared out of who knows where and simply ravaged any and all forms of life upon the land. The Emnetwyte fell, along with the Dragons, Moleians, and Elves. Only the few who managed to escape to the sky barely kept their lives.

Since then, over five hundred years have passed. The only world left to the survivors, Regul Aire, has yet to sink. With the crystallizations of hope left behind by the Emnetwyte, the Kaliyons, they continue to desperately fend off repeated invasions from the Beasts, throwing away the ephemeral lives of young girls each time.

The endless rumbling of the burning spell reactor continually shook the lower quarters of the airship. *This is definitely bad for my health* , Noft thought as she stepped away from the window. Beyond the glass lay only pure darkness and the reflection of a child staring back with a grumpy expression. Such a staring contest provided little entertainment.

“Ahh damn it! I’m bored! I’m booored!!”

She threw her back onto her spartan bed and flailed her legs about in the air. Of course, she knew that throwing a fit wouldn’t change anything, but her body longed to move.

The airship she rode upon, the land survey airship Saxifraga, hovered at an altitude of about fifty malumel above the surface. Their height was enough to safeguard against attacks from the Beasts, who cannot fly on their own. But sometimes, safety can lead to boredom.

“I thought the land was supposed to be overflowing with romance and adventure! Where are the Falcon princesses surrounded by a hundred Beasts waiting for a prince to come save them!? Why don’t I find loads of treasure when I dig up this stupid gray sand!? Where are all the ghosts of the dead bandit kings!? Where are the Beasts!?”

“Noft, shut up.” A quiet voice scolded her.

Turning her head, Noft spotted Lantolq sitting on the bed next to hers, reading some kind of book.

“What is that?”

“It was dug up yesterday. I thought it might be useful for killing time, so I secretly borrowed it from the storage room.”

Lantolq always sounded slightly pissed off. On top of that, she used not so nice words sometimes. As a result, she was feared and hated by all the little ones in the warehouse, but… well, if you spent some time with her she wasn’t all that bad. Noft wouldn’t go so far

as to say she was a good person, but then again Lantolq probably thought the same of Noft.

"So it's an ancient book. Can you read that stuff?"

Noft wrapped her arms around Lantolq from behind and peeked over her shoulder. As expected, it was a book. The color had faded a bit, but the form was still mostly intact. It showed no signs of falling apart. It must have been in some lucky condition to be preserved so well. As for the content, of course all Noft could see were meaningless symbols lined up across the pages.

"Mm… I only understand a few of the words," Lantolq replied as she grabbed a biscuit. "Not well enough to accurately understand the actual content though. I just try to piece together the words and use my imagination to take a guess at the meaning. It's like a puzzle to pass the time." She looked a little more irked than usual at the heavy object leaning on her back.

"Ooh. What's it about?"

"I told you I'm just guessing."

"Okay, then tell me your guess. Spreading your wings of imagination and deciphering ancient records has a sort of adventurous feel to it."

Lantolq sighed and made a face that Noft knew well. It was the fact that meant she would patiently go along with Noft's selfishness despite complaining about it.

"The Emnetwyte should not have come into existence. Their creation was the first and greatest mistake of the Visitors."

"Huh?"

"I told you, that's just my guess after looking at this. Based on the introduction, the first part is probably something about that."

"Hm, so if that book was found in Emnetwyte ruins, it means some of them recognized that they were evil?"

"Yes, but apparently this belief was treated as taboo and dangerous among the Emnetwyte at the time. To compare with current day Regul Aire, it might have been something like the ascension belief."

The ascension belief. Noft had heard of it before. Its proponents believe that Regul Aire is no more than a transit point, and that life must one day separate even further from the defiled land and ascend into the stars above… or something like that. Of course, just believing in it does no harm to anyone, but some radicals have stolen or illegally modified airships, so on many floating islands the belief is frowned upon.

"And then…" Lantolq's slender fingers glided across the pages.

“The humans… no… the Beasts were released and the gray truth… filled the world?”

“Ooh.” Noft leaned forward in excitement, which also meant putting more weight on Lantolq’s back.

“Noft, you’re heavy.”

“It’s talking about how the land was destroyed by the Beasts, right? Cool, it’s like a prophecy.”

“Hm, I wonder. The book looks like it was mass produced, and seems to be a children’s book or textbook or something of that nature. So maybe the Beasts were made afterwards to fit the contents of this book.”

“I see.”

Noft grabbed one of the biscuits Lantolq was holding. As simple army rations, they could definitely not be called delicious, but they were enough to satisfy a lonely stomach.

“There’s more… the sixteen fragments sing of the reenvisioning of the true world and the salvation of the end… ocean and mother, fear, dependence, complete heart… opening… dawn?”

Noft looked thoroughly confused. Lantolq seemed to be listing random words which didn’t even seem to be related, much less form a complete sentence. “What happened to that imagination of yours?”

“It’s really just a string of separate words. There’s nothing to interpret or imagine--”

A knock sounded at the door.

Frowning, Noft got off of Lantolq and walked over.

They were special guests on this airship. Everyone on board knew that. No one tried to talk to them or even come near them, and of course, no one ever paid their room a visit. An exception most likely meant there was some kind of extreme danger only they could deal with. However, it seemed too calm on the ship for that. Noft listened closely, but she heard no screams or artillery, only the humming of the spell reactor.

“Come in, it’s not locked,” she said cautiously to the visitor beyond the door.

The knob turned.

“Is this the standby room of the escort?” A Borgle man appeared in the doorway. He clearly favored durability and practicality over fashion in his apparel. He wasn’t a soldier, based on his lack of uniform, but he didn’t look like a merchant either. “I want to talk to the escort sent to protect us from the Beasts… is it just you young ladies here?”

“I don’t know who you are, but please leave,” Lantolq said in a

cold voice. “Members of the expedition are forbidden to interact with us. You should not have been able to even come near this room. What were the guards doing?”

“Ah, their debt to me from card games has piled up over the years. I just asked them and they looked the other way,” the Borgle said with a smile as he stepped further into the room. “Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Grick. I’m just a regular salvager, but I was hired by Orlandri to act as an advisor on this expedition. I’ve never really done this kinda thing before, but I just go with the flow… so what are your names?”

“Did you think we’d tell you? Also, we never asked for yours.” Noft waved the man away.

“If you’ve just been hired for this mission, then all the more reason to not break the company’s rules.” Lantolq followed Noft’s gesture.

“I mean, I just wanted to at least greet the people I’m about to entrust my life to.”

“What are you talking about old man?” Noft eyed him suspiciously. “The only ones living here are us two. As you can see, we’re a couple of markless little girls. Do we look like warriors capable of defending this ship from the terrifying Beasts?”

“Well, to be honest I still don’t fully believe it, and I don’t really want to believe it, but…” The Borgle pointed to the wrapped up bundle leaning against the wall. “I’ve heard about young ladies wielding Dug Weapons. Leprechauns, was it?”

“How do you know that much?”

“Just happened to hear it from a friend the other day… also, by the way I’m not at the age to be called an old man yet…”

“Well you sure are a lot older than us.”

Grick still didn’t seem convinced. “Anyways, I brought you guys a little something. I figured you haven’t eaten properly for a while, being on the land and all. Here, it’s a meat pie I bought from a cart in the harbor of the 31st Island right before departure.”

He placed a small package on the table. Noft’s gaze was unwillingly drawn to it; her mouth began to water and her stomach rumbled loudly. The old man was right. Ever since they left Regul Aire a little over a month ago to protect this expedition, they had only eaten rations like dried meat or biscuits, stuff that kept well, didn’t take up a lot of space, and also had absolutely no flavor. Noft longed for a properly cooked meal.

“If you’re gonna be on the ground for a while, you gotta pay attention to your food. Common sense for us salvagers. Looks like

whoever planned this expedition didn't understand that though. Oh, I had the cook put some strong herbs in the pie to help it keep fresh, but it would be best to eat it soon."

Noft could feel the excitement in her throat. But, she could not give into her desires. Gathering all her mental strength, she tore her eyes away from the package and glared at the Borgle.

"You're funny. You actually think such a simple bribe will--"

"Well then, let's eat."

"Lan!?" Noft turned her half teary and now bewildered eyes to her friend. "What are you doing? We can't take it!"

"It smells delicious and all we've eaten for the past month is biscuits. This is a temptation I cannot resist."

"I know I know but still!!"

"Borgles' tastes differ quite a lot from ours, so if we don't eat it it'll just go to waste." Lantolq smiled. "Besides, we don't have much to do at the moment, so a little conversation can't hurt, right?"

Noft gave up. No matter what she said now, it wouldn't make a difference. Once Lantolq showed that evil villain smile, nothing could change her mind. About half a year ago, she even outlasted that stubborn Kutori in an argument.

Kutori.

A name Noft didn't want to think about very much popped into her head. Some part inside of her began to hurt. Kutori was her comrade, her annoying senior, someone she could always have a playful fight with, and finally, a family member she would never see again.

While Noft and Lantolq had been lounging around on land, the foretold date had passed. An especially large Teimerre had attacked the floating islands, Kutori went off to battle, and then killed it in exchange for her own life. All according to plan. That was their job as Leprechauns. There was nothing to fear or mourn. It just made Noft feel a little lonely, knowing that when they were done with this expedition and returned home, that noisy, annoying blue haired girl would no longer be there.

"Noft? Something wrong?"

"... nothing. If you want to eat it, then go ahead." Noft once again laid down on her bed. She turned away from the other two in the room, not wanting to show her current expression.

"I'm eating it…"

"Leave half for me."

"Fiine. So anyways, Grick, was it? You were called in as an advisor, so I assume you've been a salvager for quite some time

now?"

"That's right. I believe I'm relatively experienced compared to most."

"So have you ever encountered a Beast?"

Noft felt a shiver in her spine at the mention of that word.

"Let's see…" Grick pressed his fingers against his forehead as he dug back into his memory. "I've been attacked by a 2nd, 3rd, and 6th. I've also seen the 5th and the 11th, but only at a distance."

"That many!?" Noft jolted up and exclaimed in disbelief. Her tears had somehow dried up and gone away. "We've only ever fought the 6th, the Teimerre!"

"Well it's not like I'm fighting them head on like you young ladies. I just run and barely escape with my life."

"But still, it's fair to say that you know much more about the Beasts than we do." Lantolq took back over after Noft's brief interruption.

"I wouldn't say I know that much. You got something to ask about the Beasts?"

As she peeled off the wrapper surrounding the meat pie, Lantolq began her question in a quiet voice. "I always found it strange. It's been five hundred years since we were driven out of the land. Ever since then, we've lived in fear of the 17 Beasts. The history of Regul Aire is essentially the record of how we've somehow continued to avoid the fangs of the Beasts. Despite that, we hardly know anything about them."

Here she goes again , Noft thought. Lantolq was smart, or at least smarter than Noft. Which meant she was more used to the act of thinking and was better at finding suitable things to think about. It also meant that sometimes she couldn't help but investigate questions until she found a satisfying answer. In Noft's opinion, it was best to simply not think about questions that don't have obtainable answers.

"... what exactly are the Beasts? I want to hear your thoughts on the matter."

Lantolq always thought about things she didn't need to think about and wanted to know things she didn't need to know. With her curiosity fully ablaze, she stared straight into Grick's amber eyes.

Part 2: A Dream's End, A Dream's Beginning

In Regul Aire, deep inside the forests of the 68th Floating Island, is a warehouse. According to the documents, it is a facility

owned by the Winged Guard, inside of which very important weapons are stored. Strictly speaking, this is not a lie. However, it does not give a very accurate picture of the actual situation.

The warehouse acts more like a barracks, which is large enough to house around fifty people. Stored there, or rather living there, are over thirty young girls. Also, the expenses necessary to maintain the facility are almost all paid by the Orlandri Trading Company, the manager who actually does anything is an employee of Orlandri, and the place is even marked as the Orlandri Trading Company's 4th Warehouse on the map.

The morning sun rose once again over that warehouse.

Dawn's intense rays of light penetrated the curtains and illuminated the room. The chirping of the birds could be heard loudly through the walls.

Raising the upper half of her body out of bed, Kutori stared blankly at the ceiling. A thick layer of fog seemed to envelop her memory; she couldn't clearly recall the events of the previous night.

"Nnnn…"

She lightly rubbed her eyes. A sudden shiver ran through her spine. Needless to say, winter mornings are cold. If she lounged around in her pajamas any longer, she might catch a cold.

Guess I'll get up . With her still foggy head, Kutori tried to remember her plans for the day. However, it proved to be a difficult task. She vaguely felt like there were no more battles for a while, which meant she would be free after daily training. That was good. She needed all the time and freedom she could possibly be allowed in order to go after him.

-- Him.

An image of a young man with black hair popped into her mind. After that, memories of last night slowly began to come back to her.

"... ah."

That's right. She had fainted. Overcome by encroachment from her previous life, she had fallen into a sleep she should have never woken up from. But for some reason, she woke up, clung onto Willem while crying in front of everyone, then her stomach rumbled loudly, then Lakish brought her some oatmeal, she wolfed it down, then went right back to sleep.

"Ah…"

What is this? What she some animal whose only desires were to eat and sleep? Did she only act on instinct? Was desperately clinging onto Willem in front of everyone one of her instincts? What

happened to her reason and sensibility? She couldn't have been any more pitiful. Her face felt like it would burst into flame.

But, her desire to eat and sleep was proof that she was alive. It was evidence that her body was trying to live on. When she thought about it that way, it didn't seem so bad. And if she didn't think about it that way, she might die inside soon.

Patting her flushed cheeks, Kutori looked around once more. She was in the clinic, not her own bedroom. Someone had probably been kind enough to carry her here after she suddenly passed out down the hallway. That someone was most likely -- no, most definitely -- Willem, but she tried not to think about that too much. A smile spread across her face.

Kutori Nota Seniolis is the oldest fairy soldier in the warehouse, a grown woman. She needed to be a role model for the little ones. Well, she might have set herself back a bit last night, but that was all the more reason to be careful now. She couldn't let them see her disgraceful side anymore. Just as she made up her mind to get up and wash her face before anyone saw it, the door opened.

"Oh?" A red haired woman walked in. "Looks like you were able to wake up this time."

She was tall and considerably older than Kutori, perhaps around twenty years of age. Despite clearly being a grown woman, her face gave off a somewhat childish feel, and the frills on her blouse and apron only made it more prominent.

"Willem was really worried, you know? He was all like maybe she's in another coma, or maybe she really won't wake up again this time, and said he was going to stay by you until you woke up, so I had to kick him out." The woman entered the room, opened the curtains, watered the flower pots, and changed the calendar. "Well, you had a great smile while you were sleeping, and your breathing and everything seemed fine. I had him put you in the clinic just in case, but how are you feeling now? Nothing's gotten worse, has it?"

"Eh? Ah… um…" It took Kutori a moment to realize that she was being talked to. She stared at the woman blankly and blinked. "Nai… grat?"

"Eh?"

"Ah, nothing." Kutori waved her hands about to try to dismiss the question. *That's right. The woman's name is Naigrat. She was sent here by the Orlandri Trading Company to manage the equipment in this warehouse. She takes care of us.*

"What's wrong? Half asleep?"

"Yeah, I guess." Her head still didn't seem to be fully

functioning. Apparently, the morning sun and Willem's name weren't quite enough to clear her mental fog. "Nothing's wrong, I just feel out of it. I'll go wash my face--"

"Kutori!!" The half opened door suddenly became fully opened with a loud bang. "Kutori! You're not a ghost!" A small green haired girl flew over like an arrow and clung onto Kutori.

"Ah!?"

"Hey, don't be so rough. She just recovered from her sickness." A second girl with purple hair approached a bit more calmly.

"Tiat… Panival." Kutori called their names, as if to make sure she still remembered them. She looked down at the girl hugging her stomach.

"My apologies, Kutori. Tiat could never calm down the whole time you were broken. I don't think she was able to sleep much last night either," Panival explained.

"Is that true?" Kutori asked Tiat, but received no response. She poked the top of the little girl's head, but still nothing. She then grabbed the girl's head and tilted it up only to discover that Tiat had fallen asleep while hugging her. "I guess so." By the looks of it, Tiat really didn't get much sleep last night. Knowing that Tiat cared for her so much made Kutori feel glad yet sorry for Tiat at the same time. "Not able to calm down after thinking about someone's death, huh?" And also, it made her a little sad. "You've grown up, Tiat."

Leprechauns are the lost souls of children who died so young they were unable to comprehend death. They are not strictly living, and therefore do not have the instinct to fear death. Which also means they do not grieve for the deaths of others.

But that all applies at a young age only. As the fairies grow, their hearts and minds change as well. By the time they are fully grown and start to stand on the battlefield, they are pretty much able to understand death. Their minds are able to recognize the permanent loss and immense sadness which accompany that phenomenon.

For an ordinary person of an ordinary race, that is called growing up. It is something to rejoice over. But for Leprechauns, it is suffering. They are born and raised for a single purpose: to be consumed on the battlefield. To grieve every time one of them fulfills her destiny would surely overburden the heart. As a result, many fairies pretend to not notice the feelings which stir inside of them. Deny them as unnecessary baggage. Suppress them as if they are something to be overcome, not to be dwelt on.

If Tiat chooses a different path, if she chooses to face her unfamiliar feelings head on, then surely great suffering awaits her in the future.

“It’s okay to be happy at her growth.”

Surprised, Kutori looked up and saw Naigrat standing there with a gentle smile. “Was I thinking out loud?”

“I can tell that much at least. How many years do you think I’ve been here watching you guys?”

… *Ah, that’s right* . What Kutori now felt towards Tiat were the same feelings that her seniors once felt towards her. And Naigrat had always been there watching over them.

“Anyways, I suppose we’ll let Tiat rest in here. You were going to… wash your face, was it?”

“Ah, yes.”

“After that, you should stop by the cafeteria to eat breakfast and show your smiling face to everyone. Then come back here,” Naigrat said. “You look fine, but we can’t be careless. There’s a limit to how much we can do with the equipment here, but we’ll try to do at least a basic physical examination.”

“Ah…” Of course. Why didn’t Kutori think of that herself? As expected, her head still wasn’t functioning properly. She needed to go wake herself up. “Okay, I’ll do that.” She peeled the sleeping Tiat off herself and laid her on the bed. Then, Kutori gave herself a light slap on both cheeks and headed for the door.

“... hm? What’s with that?” Panival asked, pointing to Kutori’s hair.

In the middle of her long, blue hair, a single tuft of red was mixed in.

“Eh? What is this?”

Kutori tried rubbing it out, but the discoloring remained. She tried pulling on it, but it was stuck to her head like all the normal hair. She examined it once more in the sunlight, but it was clear that the red was simply the natural color of those strands, and not stuck on by some sort of dye.

“Maybe it’s a lasting effect of your coma. I don’t think it’s anything to worry about. There are a few species whose hair color changes with the seasons or with their growth, you know?” Naigrat interrupted. “It’s a pretty color anyways, so I think it’ll be just fine.”

Will it really?

Kutori never liked her hair color much to begin with, so if it was going to change then that didn’t necessarily bother her. Just a few strands of red hair wouldn’t mess up her outfits or anything.

Besides…

"I'm sure Willem would say he likes you just the way you are."

"Stop reading my mind!" Kutori half yelled.

What am I? Kutori thought to herself.

The answer seemed simple, yet complicated at the same time.

A leprechaun. A spirit who failed to die properly. A form of life not living. A weapon made to sacrifice everything and protect those who are living.

She was attuned to Dug Weapon Seniolis. Fifteen years of age. Place of appearance: inside the forests of the 94th Island. Length of unrequited love: almost one month.

Part 3: I'm Home

He departed for town early in the morning to do some ingredient shopping. His loot included a hefty amount of flour, butter, eggs, milk, and sugar. Small quantities of honey, nuts, and dried fruits were also stuffed in the bag.

Willem walked through the great forest of the 68th Island, his beaten stone path illuminated by the sunlight pouring through the treetops. Various weeds grew out from even the tiniest cracks in the paving. The dilapidated road definitely didn't make for pleasant walking, but at least it was virtually impossible to get lost if he just followed it.

"Um um, is that bag too heavy?" Lakish asked worriedly as she walked beside him.

"Don't underestimate adults. This is nothing," Willem replied and readjusted his grip on the giant lump in his arms. "Should I carry you as well while I'm at it?"

"Ah um I think I'll pass." She waved her hands back and forth in denial of his offer. "I'm used to this road… from work."

The girls, or fairies, are officially secret weapons owned by the army. Accordingly, they don't exactly have a ton of freedom. If they're not on any kind of mission, they don't even have permission to leave the 68th Island. Well, if they use their own wings to fly to the neighboring island then no one's going to actually say anything. But anyways, that also means they basically have no restrictions as long as they remain on the 68th Island.

"How long have you been working part time at that bakery?"

"Uh almost half a year now. At first I just messed up on everything, but now I even get compliments from my boss sometimes."

“Hm?”

If Willem remembered correctly, the owner of that bakery in town was a not so friendly middle aged beast man. Whether it was his natural face or not Willem didn’t know, but he always seemed to be in a sour mood. In other words, he definitely didn’t seem like the type to be handing out compliments.

“He said things like he wants me to help run the store during the day, not just help make bread in the morning, and that he wishes I would be his kid. Stuff like that.”

“Hmmm?”

“... um, Willem? Is something wrong? Your face is scary.”

Willem was perfectly calm. Absolutely nothing was troubling him. Of course, he didn’t bother to even attempt such obvious lies. Anyways, he made a mental note to pay that bakery another visit sometime.

“Well it’s great that they allowed you to get the job. Usually soldiers aren’t allowed to have side jobs, you know?”

Strictly speaking, they are weapons, not soldiers. And also, an army that allowed its soldiers to have side jobs probably never existed at all. But then again, Willem himself was kind of like a part time soldier, so he couldn’t really talk.

“The big army man… the manager before you was against it apparently, but Naigrat convinced him.”

“Ah, I see.”

On paper, the girls are owned by the army, but in reality they’re more like private assets owned by the Orlandri Trading Company. The manager sent by the army is no more than a superficial supervisor; all the real managing is done by the one from Orlandri. In other words, Naigrat had all the real power in that situation. So if she wanted to let Lakish work, then the army manager wouldn’t have really been able to stop that, even if he was against it for some reason.

“Ah… you’re from the army too. Do you think it shouldn’t be allowed?”

“Hm?”

“You know, us working and earning money like normal people even though we’re just weapons.”

“Oh, that.” Given that he was a member of the army, or at least that’s what his title said, it would make sense for Willem to share that previous manager’s opinion. “I don’t see anything wrong with it. If a kid finds something they want to do, then it’s an adult’s job to at least not get in the way, if they’re not gonna support it. As long as

you're not giving out top secrets or selling precious equipment on the black market or something, I won't stop you."

"Really!?" Lakish's face visibly brightened. "Um, Willem, I love you. Us fairies don't have actual parents so I wouldn't know, but if I did have a father, I think I would want him to be someone like you."

Love, huh. This time, Willem could accept those words for what they were and genuinely be happy. "Well, I do try to act like you guys' parent the best I can."

"Really? Ehehe." Lakish laughed cheerfully, and Willem joined in. "Oh, but then we need a mother too… I love Naigrat too, but I think for you Kutori would be…"

As always when the little ones began saying something terrifying, Willem pretended he didn't hear.

Naigrat wore an oversized white doctor's gown over her usual apron.

"I got it at school when I got my cooking and medical licenses," she explained.

Willem was a little surprised. Well, it made sense though. Cooking and medicine were two skills necessary to take care of the fairies here. If Naigrat wasn't as talented as she was in both of those areas, she wouldn't have been able to manage this place all by herself for so long.

"Alright. I've got my gown and everything, this is going to be a real deal physical examination." Just as Naigrat promised, it was the real deal. Starting with a thorough palpation, she went on to shine light in Kutori's eyes, check her eye movements, give her special examination medicine, and take a little blood. "If I took a bite I think I could find out a lot more…" She even joked while she was at it.

"Hmmm…" Naigrat read data, scribbled it down, then moved on to the next set of numbers. As she repeated that process, her expression changed into one of surprise and bewilderment.

"Am I suffering from some kind of deadly disease or something?" asked Kutori.

"Nnn no, not that. Not that, but…"

When the examination was finally over, Naigrat buried her head in her hands and collapsed face down on the desk.

"... what's wrong?" Kutori asked again.

"The purified silver test turned out negative," Naigrat said, slowly sitting up.

"-- Um, what does that mean?" Kutori timidly pursued further explanation.

She had heard before that silver has the power to drive away

evil. That it can ward away the Vampires or sever the inexhaustible life force of the Trolls. The list of such legends goes on and on, but in the end, they are just that: legends. Superstitions.

Real silver is nothing but a fragile metal. However, it turns black in response to toxins or miasma, which makes it valuable as a tool to detect those dangerous substances. It is said that the rich use heavy and hard to use silver utensils because they fear assassination by poison. But what did all that have to do with Kutori right now?

“Purified silver is silver modified with special ashes, and instead of the usual toxins it changes color in response to twisted death. In other words, it’s used to sense Ghosts or Ghouls or other creatures of that nature.”

“Ghosts…” Kutori mumbled. She thought for a bit. “Um… so what does that mean?” Then, the conclusion jumped into her head. She gulped and asked one last time. “... could it really mean that…”

“Yes. Of course, I have no idea why, but just going by the results that’s the only plausible conclusion.” Naigrat lightly shook the test tube in her hand. The silver contents shook about. “As you know, Leprechauns are a type of Ghost. So when I mixed your blood with this silver, it should have turned black immediately. The lack of a reaction can only mean one thing.”

Naigrat’s logic was simple, which meant there was no room for counterargument.

“In other words, you are no longer a Leprechaun.”

“... hold up. This makes no sense. Usually, you’re born a certain race and you stay that way until you die, right? You can’t just wake up one day and say ‘I’m going to stop being a troll’ and go get it changed.”

“I’m curious as to why you chose Trolls as the example, but yes that is usually the case.”

“Then why?”

“Like I said, I don’t know why. That’s just what the test results tell us. We won’t know anything further until we get you checked out by a specialist.”

“But… then…”

The Dug Weapons, or Kaliyon, are extraordinary weapons only usable by the long extinct Emnetwyte. However, the Leprechauns, while only a substitute, can still wield the ancient swords as if they were Emnetwyte. That’s the entire reason why the fairies were placed in this warehouse as secret anti-Beast weapons.

“That’s right. You shouldn’t touch a Dug Weapon again. We

don’t know what’ll happen. … I’m not just trying to scare you. If someone of a race very different than the Emnetwyte touches a Dug Weapon, their life could be in danger, you know that right?”

Of course, Kutori knew. That’s why almost all of the Reptrace soldiers never even attempted to approach the fairies. Only a handful had the guts to get as close as Limeskin did.

“You’re still a markless, so you probably aren’t that far from the Emnetwyte, but we shouldn’t draw conclusions based on appearances alone.”

Kutori knew. Even if it was just a small chance, she couldn’t risk unnecessarily exposing herself to danger.

But still.

It was in her name. Kutori Nota Seniolis. If she could never wield her sword again, she would just become powerless and worthless Kutori.

“... if I can’t use Dug Weapons, then I’m no longer fit to be a fairy soldier.”

“That’s right,” Naigrat said as she added on something to the end of her scribbles.

“If I’m no longer a fairy soldier, then I can’t be here anymore.”

“Ah… I guess you could look at it that way.” The Troll woman frowned. “But stay here. We can do something about the official documents, and it’s not like you have a reason why you really want to get out of here, right?”

“But…”

“Don’t say you have nothing to do anymore. There’s no room for boredom in the life of a woman with hopes and dreams. Remember that.” Naigrat wagged her finger at Kutori. “You survived. You’re home now. You need to treasure that while you can.”

“But what does that even mean…”

“Let’s see. Maybe you should start training to be a bride.”

“... eh?”

“I’m serious. Willem’s contract ends in three months. Since the job was originally meaningless and the technicians didn’t even stay here in the first place, there aren’t any rules or anything for extending the contract. But if he left, it would be a huge loss to us.”

Kutori knew. She knew, but…

“Of course, knowing him, if we all asked him to stay he probably would. But that’s not enough. We need something stronger, something that’ll let him really feel like this is his home. Do you get what I’m saying?”

Kutori was beginning to lose her.

“If you want to let your cattle graze freely, you first need to discipline them so that they return to their pens at the end of the day, right?”

The metaphor was a bit unrelatable for Kutori.

“Besides, it would be a waste for the lineage of the last Emnetwyte in the world to end after just one generation, wouldn’t it? Putting aside his use as food for now, it would be nice if he could have a wife, start a family, and leave behind some descendants, right?”

Wait a second… things were starting to get weird.

“To be honest, I was thinking maybe I could try to do--”

“No!”

The chair that Kutori had been sitting in fell to the ground with a crash. Her face was burning hot. Naigrat’s expression of surprise slowly turned into a teasing smile.

“No? Why not?”

Based on a previous report, Willem had a preference for kind and reliable women a little older than him. Unfortunately, those were conditions that Kutori couldn’t fulfill no matter what. And moreover, Naigrat fit them perfectly.

“... because I don’t have a chance.”

“You really think so? I’m not so sure about that.” Naigrat shrugged. “Well then you better work hard to grab him. Or else I or another girl will.” She laughed.

Ahh, Kutori thought. *So this is the kindness of an adult woman.*

Kutori felt as if Naigrat had just shown her everything she lacked.

After breakfast, when all the littles ones moved out to the grounds for training, Willem set up camp in the kitchen. He put on an apron over his army uniform, wrapped a bandana around his head, and laid out the heap of ingredients he bought in town this morning on the counter. And then, he got to work.

The way Willem saw it, the most valuable quality on the battlefield is a good imagination. What, specifically, does victory entail? What events will lead up to and follow it? What conditions need to be met to make them happen? Only those who can piece all that together in their heads can actually make their desired future a reality.

Willem was well experienced in these matters, being a seasoned veteran himself. For example, this is what he predicted. All the little ones in the warehouse would want to eat the butter cake, even if he tried to explain that it was a reward for Kutori's coming home. On top of that, it wasn't in Kutori's personality to be able to eat the cake all by herself while all the little ones watched. She would definitely try to share it. To conclude, in order to get Kutori to eat the necessary amount of butter cake, Willem needed to prepare at least some for everyone else.

Now, it was time to see the results.

The exhausted little girls coming into the cafeteria after training

let out screams of excitement like a pack of wild animals. Before their eyes lay a giant, freshly baked butter cake sitting on the table, emitting a sweet aroma which filled the room. It was enough to knock all the sensibility right out of the girls. Their eyes glowed like wild beasts', and drool nearly spilled out of their mouths. Right as the newly transformed hunger monsters were about to pounce…

"Don't forget your manners, okay everybody?" the true hunger monster, or rather Naigrat, said with a smile.

The girls all quietly sat down, waited patiently until everyone's slices were delivered, did their usual pre-meal prayer, then carried their forks to their mouths. All at the same time, their eyes began to sparkle.

The first round was, as expected, a major success. But Willem had no time to relish his victory. Next was a focus fire round on Kutori. He looked around, only to discover that the key piece to his mission, the blue haired girl herself, was missing.

"If you're looking for Kutori, she's probably in her room," Nephren told him as she stuffed her face and emitted sparkle out of her eyes.

"Why? I'm pretty sure I told her to come…"

"You know, she tends to act pretentious at the weirdest times." Aiseia turned around and joined in on the conversation.

Willem remembered something he heard sometime ago. Apparently, whenever Kutori Nota Seniolis ate at the fairy warehouse's cafeteria, she never ordered dessert. But she definitely didn't have a burning hatred for sweet things. Tiat once explained that it was because Kutori was an adult. For some reason, Tiat said it proudly, like she was talking about herself, but anyways according to her only children stuff their faces with desserts, while adults calmly decline them. Willem thought that view on things was more childlike than enjoying a dessert, but he kept quiet.

As the oldest fairy soldier in the warehouse, Kutori desperately tried to appear as grown up and reliable as she could to her younger siblings. No other fairy had ever witnessed Kutori eat a sweet treat before. Willem thought that was entirely like Kutori.

"Well no big problem. All ya gotta do is personally deliver some cake to her room and then spend some sweet sweet time together."

"Don't make it sound weird." He lightly poked Aiseia's forehead.

Ten minutes later, in Kutori's room.

"So? Why was the main star Kutori the only one not present

in the cafeteria?"

"Um… well you know, I don't really want others seeing me eat this…"

"And why not?"

"It's so childish, isn't it? And also, apparently I look really embarrassing when I eat that kind of thing, so as the oldest fairy around here, I don't want to show that to everyone."

A reason Willem already knew, and an answer he could easily have predicted. He let out a great big sigh.

"What?"

"Just saying, caring so much about those things is what's really childish."

"Wha--!"

As Kutori shot up furiously, Willem placed a piece of cake on her desk.

A sweet fragrance began to diffuse through the room.

The anger disappeared from Kutori's eyes, and she fell back down into her chair.

"Shall I prepare some tea as well, princess?" Trying to hold back a laugh, Willem grabbed a sliver with his fork.

"... butter cake?"

"Yep." He didn't know why she had to ask, but he nodded anyway.

"... did you put nuts in it?"

"I thought it would give it a nice flavor and texture."

Kutori was examining the cake from every angle.

"... it looks delicious."

"It is."

"... I can eat this, right?"

"Obviously. Who do you think I made it for?"

She stared at it some more. Then, she lightly jabbed it with the tip of her fork. Digging in, she carved out a piece just big enough for one bite. With trembling hands, she slowly raised it up.

"..."

Finally, she steeled her resolve, and slid it into her mouth.

Okay, okay. I'll make you eat so much cake you get heartburn.

She remembered the promise they exchanged that night.

Finally, it had been fulfilled.

And on top of that, she had accomplished something Willem never got the chance to do. She had lived through the battle and returned home to where she belonged. She got to hear 'welcome

back' from the person that had waited for her.

Kutori chewed for a while, then swallowed with a small gulp.

"It tastes like butter cake."

"That's because it is butter cake," Willem said with a shrug.

A large droplet fell onto Kutori's knee.

"It's kind of late to be saying this… I know… but I really… I really made it home."

Ten days had already passed since Kutori and the other two returned to the warehouse. If you count the time since the end of the battle, it had already been over two weeks.

But only now was she really beginning to realize that fact.

Willem never got to see the battlefield on the 15th Floating Island. He could only guess how much she went through to protect their promise.

"You must have worked hard." He felt like an idiot, not able to find anything better to say than that.

"I did… I really did…" The tears spilling out of Kutori's eyes began to dampen her sleeves. "I'm sorry… I can't even taste it anymore. I think it tastes good, but my head's full with other things right now…"

"I see."

Sitting next to the quietly sobbing Kutori, Willem thought. If he were in her position, what would he have done? In other words, even though it would never in a million years happen, if he was somehow able to protect his promise with Almaria, what would have happened? If he was able to protect the things he wanted to protect, return home to the place he wanted to return home to, and stuff his face with the daughter's killer butter cake as a reward, what would he have done?

Willem figured he probably would have just cried uncontrollably. He would have brought a merciless storm of hugs and kisses down upon all the children in the orphanage. They would say it hurts or call him creepy, but he would have still refused to let them go.

"There's seconds, so don't hold back, alright?"

"I know… I know, but I can't…"

She hadn't eaten very much since her second bite. Well, that was understandable. Willem chuckled and placed his palm gently on Kutori's head.

This time, she didn't tell him to not treat her like a child.

"I already said it yesterday, and it's kinda late, but… welcome back, Kutori."

“Ah…” The fork slipped out of her fingers. She slowly raised her head while sniffling countless times. Her deep blue eyes were blurred with her overflowing tears. “I’m home.”

Kutori’s forehead fell against Willem’s stomach. He could feel the warmth of her tears through his army uniform.

“I finally said it.”

“Mhm. And I finally heard it.” He lightly patted the back of her head.

As Kutori clung onto Willem and bawled, her body trembled so violently that Willem suspected it was due to something more than just happiness.

Part 4: Warm Days in a Cold Season

Recently, rumors have been going aroundw that rain is leaking into the hallway on the second floor. A quick visit confirmed that some carpentry work was indeed necessary. Someone could be called in from town on a later day, but for now it could use some rough patching up--

“... hm?” Still looking up at the ceiling, Willem tilted his head in confusion.

“What’s wrong? Find something weird?” Kutori followed Willem’s gaze, but she couldn’t find anything other than the usual old, rotting wooden boards making up the ceiling.

“Oh, nothing. I just felt like this same thing happened before.”

“Really?” Kutori tried digging back in her memory, but came up empty. “The last thing I remember you repairing is the wall that Collon kicked down.”

“That’s not what I meant… never mind. If I can’t remember, it must not have been very important.” Willem cracked his neck. “I think there’s still enough boards and nails from last time… hey, do you know where the wooden hammer is?”

“Didn’t you ask that before? Have you already forgotten?”

Now that she mentioned it, maybe he did.

“My bad… so, where is it?”

“Wow, you really are bad at remembering things,” Kutori said with a laugh. She then opened her mouth again to say something. “-- huh?”

The location of the wooden hammer. Kutori was certain she should know it. Yet for some reason, it wasn’t popping into her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sorry, I, um… it looks like I forgot too.”

“Oh come on, you too? Must be one stealthy wooden hammer.”

“Y-Yeah…” She nodded hesitantly, still perplexed at the situation. An ominous feeling crept up on her, but she tried to reassure herself that it was no big deal.

“Well, no worries. If we’ve both forgotten, we just have to find a third person now don’t we?”

“Y-Yeah… okay.”

Willem was a nice guy. At times he could be a bit awkward and clueless about girls, but when beside him Kutori could tell that he was always working his absolute hardest to care for them. His actions and words conveyed his kindness well. So of course, she wanted to be beside him as much as possible. To be closer to him. To be spoiled by him.

Kutori forced a smile. “Let’s go then. It’s probably in one of the storage rooms, either on the first or second floor.”

“Got it.”

Willem turned around and started walking. Kutori stared at his empty left hand. If she ran up and grabbed it, would he be surprised? He probably wouldn’t resist… but would he think positively of it? Back on the 11th Island when Nephren clung onto his arm, he didn’t force her away, but he looked a little bothered. If she held his hand and got the same kind of expression in return, it would be… not very pleasant. With a debate raging in her mind, Kutori walked quietly half a step behind Willem.

“Ooooh.” Her head poking out from behind the hallway corner, Tiat seemed to be getting rather excited about something.

“Is this… adult romance?” Also peeking out from behind the corner was Lakish, whose cheeks were getting a little red for some reason.

“The half step behind… suddenly being all alone together, they don’t quite know how to close in the distance,” Aiseia said, snooping with the other two.

“I can hear you guys,” Kutori called out, and the three heads disappeared behind the wall.

Five days had passed since her reawakening.

At least for now, there were no visible problems with Kutori’s body.

She hadn’t really accepted Naigrat’s proposition, but she also didn’t really have anything else to do in particular, having lost the role of fairy soldier. All that time she used to spend on her own training could now be used for other activities. For the time being, leading the little ones in their training and helping out Naigrat kept

her busy.

Kutori scooped up a little bit of soup and tested it. A slight tingling sensation covered the tip of her tongue. Not bad. But, considering the volume of lamb to be added later, it might be best to give it a more tangy flavor. She chopped up some herbs and tossed them into the pot.

"... meat with plenty of spices again? The favorite meal of a certain someone, huh?"

Aiseia came in and started teasing her, but Kutori soon kicked her out again, citing the well known rule that only the girl on meal duty is allowed in the kitchen. The rule applied to all the fairies, but not to Willem, Naigrat, or Kutori, who had been recently added to that list as Naigrat's new assistant.

It might be a good idea to sweeten the vegetables a little too. Well, that would make them more popular with the little ones, but she didn't have quite enough information to tell whether or not it would be well received by the important someone. Her options limited, Kutori decided to serve them as is for today and observe his reaction. Today, tomorrow, the day after. If she grew just a little every day, she would surely become the version of herself she aspired to be sooner or later.

"Keeping the kitchen all to yourself just to please the stomach of one person isn't good, ya know?"

Kutori heard a voice coming from right outside the kitchen, so she threw a ladle to scare the pest off.

The little girls ran.

There was talk of many shooting stars visible in the northern sky. The weather was good and the air clear, but even if they weren't, it would be a shame to miss a chance to see such beauty in the night sky.

The problem lied in finding a suitable place to view the spectacle. The large window in the cafeteria? Through the window in the little ones' room? On the bench in front of the main entrance? In the end, though, the consensus was that viewing from such boring, ordinary places had its limits. They instead had a special VIP seating area waiting for them: the roof. The roof could normally be found filled with laundry fluttering in the wind, but on a clear night it would surely make for a great viewing platform.

The little girls ran restlessly, racing through the hallways to ensure that they could snatch the best seats for themselves.

"W-Wait!" Tiat yelled, chasing after them with a bath towel in hand. "Dry your hair after bathing! You'll catch a cold!!"

A perfectly logical and reasonable demand. Unfortunately, the minds of young children tend to ignore logic and reason when occupied with something more exciting. This especially holds true for the young fairies, who don't particularly care for their own health very much in the first place.

The little girls ran, their wet hair dripping behind them as they went.

"Wait up!!" Tiat finally succeeded in catching one and scrubbing her head all over with the towel, but during that time the others continued their escape. Chances of catching all of them were beginning to look very slim.

Tiat's struggle could be heard even outside.

"She's really doing a good job looking after them, huh?" Willem said as he gazed up at the night sky from his bench.

Tiat was still only ten years old, she was still very short, and her thoughts and actions were, as expected, still childish. Considering that, Tiat's attempts to be the grown up one were a little unexpected to Kutori. However, she wasn't exactly surprised.

"She's probably trying to act like me." Kutori laughed. "Just a little while ago, I was the one chasing them like that."

"I see. That makes sense." Still looking up, Willem smiled.

Admiring the same night sky, Kutori stole a brief glimpse at Willem's face. He seemed rather calm. Sitting next to each other on the bench made Kutori's heart accelerate, but apparently it did not have a similar effect on Willem. A part of her felt disappointed, but another part of her thought that things were fine as they were.

"Oh yeah, you were chasing something the time we first met too. Well, it wasn't so long ago that we can reminisce about it yet, but…"

"Eh…"

Countless marbles rolling.

"I don't think I ever got to ask. Why were you on the 28th Island back then?"

…...

"Moreover, Market Medlei? Not somewhere tourists usually go. Were you on your way home from a battle with the Beasts or something?"

……

"The buildings around there are a mess, and it's not exactly the safest area. Stuff is always falling out of the sky. Usually it was kettles or oil cans… sometimes it was a chicken and you'd have your dinner for the day."

…… *what…*

"But that was the first time I saw a girl fall out of the sky. I was pretty surprised."

… what is he talking about?

The events he described sounded so unfamiliar to Kutori. She felt like they were surely precious memories, but she had no recollection of them. She didn't forget them. The memories weren't exactly missing either. The Kutori that experienced those events was no longer alive.

"Kutori? What's wrong?"

"Ah… um…" She didn't know how to answer. She didn't have the confidence to convey the strange realization that had just passed through her head. And more than anything, she was scared of disappointing Willem. She didn't want him to notice that she was no longer the girl he once cared for so much. "Um…"

What was she doing? How could she think such things? Willem was worried for her. She needed to look up and tell him 'I"m fine'. She needed to reassure him. This was no time to be acting suspiciously. She couldn't let Willem notice anything wrong. She couldn't let him know the truth. What is wrong? What is the truth? She didn't know. She didn't know, but they were important. They were things she could not afford to yield if she wanted to remain Kutori Nota Seniolis.

"Kutori?" Willem peered into Kutori's face with a suspicious look.

-- Suddenly, an ominous metallic sound rang out from above.

Instinctively, Kutori raised her head.

A metal railing ran around the perimeter of the fairy warehouse roof. However, it wasn't exactly the sturdiest of railings, and on top of that it was beginning to deteriorate because of old age. At this point, it was unstable enough to break if someone were to lean on it. She had been thinking that it needed to be repaired for a while now, but everyone was always busy and it had continually been put off until later.

At a height of two stories in the air, Kutori spotted a small girl in freefall. Short even among the little ones at the warehouse, her lemon colored hair fluttered in the wind.

Almita!?

Now, she wasn't actually that high up, but that also meant it wouldn't be long until she hit the ground. Kutori would never make it in time by just running.

Willem dashed forward.

It didn't look like that Nightingale something or whatever that technique was called. The distance was probably too far. Techniques developed to cover a short distance cannot, of course, be used to cover a distance any greater than that. But, like Kutori, he definitely wouldn't be able to make it at his natural running speed.

Kutori activated her spell vision.

She saw the embers of magic starting to ignite inside Willem's body.

This idiot!!

She kicked off the ground.

Willem's body was covered in old wounds, to the point where Naigrat considered it a miracle that he was even alive. Igniting Venom with that body was equivalent to suicide. And this man would undoubtedly carry out such an act without thinking twice in order to save his precious daughters.

So Kutori needed to beat him to it. She ignited her own Venom, spread her illusionary wings and glided through the air, leaving a trail of silvery blue light in her wake. She shot past Willem, held out her arms, and caught the girl just before she collided with the ground.

Then, tightly hugging the little one to her body, Kutori fell. Her remaining momentum did not dissipate so easily. She tumbled a few times before finally being stopped by the fairy warehouse's wall.

"Hnn…"

It would be a lie to say that it didn't hurt at all. However, the Venom protecting her body prevented any major injuries. The girl she held in her arms looked a little dazed, but seemed to be just fine.

"Kutori!?" Willem called desperately as he ran over.

"Don't sound like such a crybaby… you're an adult, aren't you?" Kutori stood up and brushed the dirt off her clothes. "I'm fine. And look, so is Al… um…" She gave the girl in her arms a little shake. "She's fine too. Just a little dirty."

"That's not the problem. Don't be so reckless! Are you dizzy?! Can you feel your fingertips?! Nothing feels weird in your spine, right!?" Willem grabbed her shoulders and drew in closer.

"H-Hey! Too close! I'm glad, but not now not now!"

"Listen! Venom is the opposite of life. Igniting it means weakening your own body's will to live. You can't go around using it without something to stop you from actually killing yourself!"

Of course, Kutori already knew all that. It was fundamental knowledge for anyone that used magic.

“And Leprechauns already have a weak life force, so even without having to put much effort into controlling it they can conjure strong Venom,” Willem continued.

“Yeah, so…”

“But you’re not one anymore!” he yelled. “Besides, what was that reckless ignition!? Leprechaun or not, a person would usually instantly die if they did that!”

“Eh…”

Now that Willem mentioned it, Kutori realized for the first time. Igniting Venom is like igniting a real flame. In order to create a blazing inferno, you first need to start with a little spark and build it up over time. Venom doesn’t work very well in sudden, on the fly situations. Of course doing something like what Kutori just did is very reckless and dangerous, but normally it would not even be possible in the first place.

“I… I thought I would lose you again.”

“Geez.” Kutori’s head had already been a mess before this, and now it was only getting worse. Countless thoughts clogged her mind, Willem’s face was close, seeing him up close she noticed his eyelashes were unexpectedly long…

“Calm down.” She lightly patted Willem on the cheek. She patted herself too while she was at it. Willem wasn’t the only one who needed to calm down. “First, I’ll return your words right back at you. If I didn’t do it, you would have, wouldn’t you? You would’ve recklessly conjured Venom to speed yourself up. I was watching. I saw.”

Willem fell silent.

“Besides, I’m fine. I don’t feel dizzy, my spine is normal… my fingertips are a bit numb but it’ll go away by itself soon.”

“You’re not just acting strong, are you?”

“Wow, I see I’m very trusted.” Kutori laughed and shrugged Willem’s arms off her shoulders.

Looking up at the roof, she saw that the railing was completely busted, as expected. By the edge, Tiat was on all fours and looking their way with a face that seemed as if it would burst into tears any moment.

“It’s okay! I caught her!” she yelled up, and Tiat’s mood improved immediately. “But it’s still dangerous, so no going on the roof for a while! Lead the other kids downstairs!”

“O-Okay! Got it!”

Tiat stood up and got to work rounding up the littles ones still on the roof. Kutori could trust Tiat to get them to safety.

“Well then I’m going to take this one to the bathtub. You should go help Tiat.”

“Ah…” Willem, still slightly dazed, nodded.

Luckily, there was still quite a lot of warm water left in the tub. There was no need to get more water from the river or to heat it up with Venom, so they could get right down to business. Kutori scrubbed the little girl’s bubble covered lemon hair. Her fluffy head had picked up a hefty amount of dirt while they were tumbling around on the ground. It would take a bit of effort for Kutori to get it all out.

“U-Um…” The little girl, holding her eyes shut tightly to keep the water out, cautiously began to speak. “S-Sorry.”

“If you’re going to apologize, say it to Tiat, not me. If you listened to her, you wouldn’t have ended up in such a dangerous situation.”

“O-Okay… sorry.”

Is she even listening ? Well, Kutori couldn’t expect much more. When kids of that age get scolded for doing something, they tend to not focus on what they actually did wrong. She probably didn’t even get slightly scared at almost falling to her death, so she most likely didn’t understand why Kutori was scolding her in the first place. Kutori was once again reminded how twisted the ‘lives’ of the Leprechaun were, lacking even the fundamental instinct to survive.

She looked up.

A large mirror sat in the bathing room of the fairy warehouse. It was put there by Naigrat around the time when Kutori first came here. According to Naigrat, all girls, weapons or not, needed to keep up their appearances. The mirror was just one of many things Naigrat added to the warehouse, but anyways…

“... huh?”

Kutori sensed something strange in the image reflected in the mirror: red. Her hair was red. Just yesterday, or rather even just a few moments ago, only a few strands had been red. But now, the new color covered almost a third of her head.

What is going on?

She felt like her situation might be slightly different than those of the beast people that Naigrat described whose hair changes color with the seasons or with growth. Those species shed their hair before growing a new set of a different color. Their hair doesn’t suddenly change while still stuck to their heads. That meant what Kutori was experiencing had to be something else entirely.

A red eyed girl is looking this way .

-- This feeling. The numerous nonsensical images running through her head. Kutori remembered. Her own body seeming like a total stranger's. Strong, random feelings of hatred and loss. And also…

"... Elq…?"

She remembered that name, and only that name. Everything else had escaped her memory.

"Huh? What was it…"

Her body began to shake. Her field of view wobbled back and forth.

"Kutori?" The bubble covered little girl turned around and looked up at her.

What is this girl's name again? Kutori couldn't remember. It was almost as if she never knew it. But why? There are only a little more than thirty residents in the fairy warehouse. All of them are precious family. Or they should be. So why?

"Are you cold?"

No. That's not it. Something else had grabbed hold of her heart and frozen it. But she didn't know what that something was. Kutori sat there, stunned, unable to put any of her haphazard thoughts into words.

She had wanted to hear 'welcome back'.

She had wanted to say 'I'm home'.

She had wanted to eat butter cake.

All of those wishes had come true. She had returned home to where she belonged, met the person she wanted to see one last time, and completed everything she wanted to do.

Their promise was fulfilled.

The end had caught up to the girl, and now silently laid a hand on her shoulder.

Chapter 3: Even If the Future Is Uncertain

Part 1: The Faceless Girl

What am I? Kutori thought to herself.
Kutori Nota Seniolis. A fully grown fairy soldier. User of Dug

Weapon Seniolis. One who met Willem, learned much, and was given hope.

Really?

… really.

She called over Aiseia in the middle of the night.

"Brr it's pretty cold, huh? Shoulda worn another layer."

The two of them stood on top of a small hill next to the harbor district. The wind was always strong here. The view was also good, so they would easily be able to spot anyone coming.

"Sorry. I'll keep this short, so bear with me."

"... hm?" Aiseia looked at Kutori questioningly as she shivered. "If you brought me all the way out here for a short talk, I'm guessing it's something you really don't anyone else to hear."

"Yeah, something like that. Well, you can probably already guess what it's about."

"No no. I just know a few more facts and listen more closely than the average person. I'm not some god that knows everything, ya know?" Aiseia said as she put her lantern on the ground and sat down. "So there's actually something I wanted to ask you too. Mind if I go first?"

"... that's fine. What is it?"

"Who are you?"

Aiseia asked that question in such a nonchalant manner, almost as if she were simply asking for tonight's menu. Kutori's breathing froze for a split second.

"Kutori Nota Seniolis," she said slowly, as if deeply reflecting upon each individual word.

"You sure?"

"Do I look like someone else?"

"Guess not…"

The wind played with Kutori's hair as it whistled by. The sky blue melded into the surrounding darkness of night, becoming nearly indistinguishable. The red, however, could clearly be seen dancing about in midair.

"Well then that's all from me. What did you want to talk about?"

"Nn." Kutori gazed up at the sky. Black clouds which looked like nothing more than shadows glided rapidly over their heads. Beyond them lay a slightly blurred starry sky and a slightly dimmed gold tinted moon. "I thought for a long time about how to talk about this, but given your question I assume you've already figured it all out?"

“Not really. That just now was a good old technician style guess. There’s only one thing I know with certainty: the encroachment from your previous life hasn’t gone away or paused. Kutori Nota Seniolis’ memory and personality are being hijacked as we speak, am I right?”

“Mhm. That’s what it looks like.” Kutori grabbed her wildly out of control hair and held it close to her chest. “Encroachment itself is a rare occurrence, and encroachment before twenty is a rare case among rare cases, was it? When your encroachment happened, was it like this too?”

“Yep. Or at least, I think so. I myself don’t remember a thing about it, and the exact process might have been a bit different than in your case.” Aiseia smiled, but Kutori knew it was only a mask. She always made that face whenever she wanted to hide her true emotions. “You’ve known me for a long time. So you knew the old Aiseia too, right? Cheerful, always meddling in other people’s business, not honest with herself at all… her hobby was writing fiction, she never missed a single day in her diary… Aiseia Myse Valgalis was that kind of girl. I first came to know all that after I read through her diary.”

Ah, back then , Kutori thought. That was around two years ago. Aiseia, who had just become a fully grown fairy soldier, suddenly said she caught a cold and holed up in her room for days. She must have been desperately scouring all those diary entries that whole time. Looking back on it, Kutori felt like Aiseia’s personality changed just a little bit after those few days… or maybe not. It was hard to tell. They weren’t very close back then.

“Was it rough?”

“You bet. I thought I was going to go crazy. A few times I even wanted to die. But doing that wouldn’t bring back the owner of this body… the real Aiseia. The only way I could pay for my sins was to take on the life I had erased… to carry on the existence of Aiseia Myse Valgalis without anyone noticing. Or anyways, that’s what I told myself, and somehow I’ve made it this far.”

“So we were tricked this whole time?”

“That’s right. Are you mad?”

Am I mad? Kutori asked herself. She could feel no anger. She felt no bewilderment either. The truth simply sunk in quietly, as if she had merely learned a new piece of trivia.

“A diary, huh?” she took a seat next to Aiseia. “Maybe I should keep one too.”

“Well in your case, it might be a bit hard to go unnoticed.

Unlike with me, your whole appearance and everything is changing."

Ah . The red mixed in with Kutori's hair would most likely completely take over the blue sooner or later. Such a noticeable transformation would indeed be quite difficult to hide from everyone.

"Would you even want someone to take on your life though? Not that I'm trying to tell you what to do or anything, but do you really want someone else going to the places where you always wanted to go or being where you always longed to be?"

Ah . That did sound rather unpleasant.

"Any feelings of wanting to go someplace or wishes of wanting to be somewhere will probably disappear anyways, right? So there's nothing to really be upset about." Kutori hugged her knees tightly. "... or maybe it would be better to die now, while I still remember things."

"That might be one viable option. Seriously. Right now there are a few things remaining in your heart to cling onto, things that help you live on. But soon they'll be gone. It'll probably be even more painful than you think."

"That's true…" She buried her head in between her knees. The girl sitting next to her placed an arm around Kutori's shoulder. "Aiseia?"

"It's pretty windy and cold, ya know? My body temperature's not high like Nephren's, but I hope it'll do."

"... aha." A small laugh escaped Kutori's lips. "Thanks. You're pretty warm."

"Well that's good. Life was worth living after all, huh?"

It wasn't clear whether it was simply the result of coincidence piled on top of coincidence or if it was an outcome caused by someone's intentional actions, but the encroachment from her previous life was certainly occurring, and it was certainly a real threat.

It devoured the very essence that made her herself, destroyed her heart, chipped away at her memories, murdered her soul… and then, through the process of remembering, the revived spirit of her predecessor gradually hijacked the remainder of her physical body. The process all occurred automatically, regardless of the will of the owner of her previous life.

No miracle of love saved her.

Or perhaps one did, but time was almost up.

The girl named Kutori Nota Seniolis would soon disappear for good.

"Are you keeping it a secret from Mr. Technician?"

“Yeah. If he knew, he would be worried.”

“What’s wrong with that? I think you have the privilege to have him worrying about you.”

“Maybe.”

Kutori had thought of that before. But if she told him, she would only be able to see his desperate, worrisome face for the rest of her remaining time. She wanted him to think about her. But she didn’t want him to cry over her. She didn’t want him to see her as some tragic heroine.

“I want us both to be happy for just a little longer… I guess.”

Aiseia didn’t look very impressed. “Saying lines that sound like they’re straight of a cheesy romance… at least we know you’re definitely still Kutori.”

The two looked at each other and smiled bittersweetly.

“Well at the very least, no more Venom, okay?” Aiseia said faintly. “Of course, I’m me, and you’re you. We’re both fairies, but in the end all that means is that we’re both lost souls of children that died too young or whatever. We’re family, but at the same time we’re completely different. There’s no guarantee that what’s happening to you is working the same way as what happened to me. But still, at least listen to that piece of advice.”

“Mm.” Kutori nodded.

“Obviously, that also means no touching Dug Weapons. That’s the least you can do if you want to remain here as long as you can.”

“Mm… understood. Thanks, Aiseia.”

“By the way, you’re not gonna ask, huh? What my real name is or where I’m from or any of that?”

Kutori failed to see the importance of those questions. “You’re Aiseia too. Cheerful, always meddling in other people’s business, not honest with yourself at all.” She lightly poked Aiseia on the tip of her nose. “Our precious comrade, and, above all, friend. You don’t look like anyone else to me.”

“Hahaha. Well then I’m glad.”

She could never trust that smile of Aiseia’s. Everyone in the fairy warehouse agreed on that point. After all, who would trust someone that keeps on smiling regardless of whether they’re happy, sad, angry, or confused?

Despite that, just now, it occurred to Kutori that maybe, just maybe, she could trust it sometimes.

On the rim of Aiseia’ eye, illuminated by the faint, shaky light of the lantern beside them, a single tear glistened.

Part 2: The Girl with a Crush and the Woman in Love

Willem had a terrible dream.

In it, his master, Navrutri, and the emperor were all drinking and having a merry old time. They were all extreme in their treatment of women in their own ways, so of course the topic of conversation quickly shifted to women. His master, who was really just a perverted old man at heart, offered his opinions on breasts and buttocks. Navrutri, who claimed to have numerous lovers in the various towns he had traveled to (which was probably true), talked about a particular beautiful woman he met in the Flowing Sands Confederation. And finally, the emperor, famous for always touching his court ladies somewhat inappropriately (and being yelled at by his wife), went on and on about the fresh innocence of his new maid with the dreamy eyes of a teenage boy.

I don't want to be a part of this…

As soon as Willem thought that, however, his shoulders were suddenly grabbed by three hands.

"I want to hear from you too," Navrutri said.

"Spit it all out," his master ordered with a drunken smile.

"That reminds me, I heard you were alone with my niece the other day," the emperor remarked suggestively as he leaned in closer.

Willem tried to run away using training as an excuse, but it didn't work. He was held down in his chair while extravagant amounts of alcohol were poured into his mouth. Before long, his consciousness began to grow hazy and his lips started to move on their own, spilling out the names of the women he knew.

"-- Technician. Yo, Technician. What are you doing sleeping in here?"

Willem Kumesh, Second Technician, woke up at the sound of a voice. With a quick look around he was able to grasp the situation. The first thing that caught his eye was a mountain of completely unorganized bundles of paper. The next thing to catch his eye was a mountain of completely unorganized bundles of paper. Right, left, up, down, no matter where he looked he saw pretty much the same thing. In other words, he was in the reference room of the fairy warehouse.

"You weren't in your room so I was wondering where you were… and then I find you here of all places."

"... Aiseia?" A brown haired girl stood nearby with her hands on

her hips and a not so impressed look.

"Mhm, your very own Aiseia Myse Valgalis. Anyways, if you don't hurry to the cafeteria soon there won't be anymore breakfast."

"I see…" The previous night he got the idea to organize the resource room for the first time in a while. But, as expected, it proved to be a very difficult task. Not only did he lose track of documents, it seemed like he also lost track of time, and somewhere along his arduous journey he had passed out on the couch. "Well, can't go without food."

Willem sat up, and, a split second later, a small girl rolled off the couch.

"... ouch." The gray haired girl picked herself up and sat on the floor.

"Ah, I was wondering where that warm blanket came from."

"It's cold now, so I didn't want you to get sick."

Makes sense. Willem was grateful. "Thanks… so why did you end up sleeping on the couch too?"

"It's cold now, so I didn't want you to get sick."

This time, her reasoning didn't make a whole lot of sense, and Willem wasn't too grateful.

"Collon's had a fever since yesterday, and Tiat and Almita are sneezing. If you let your guard down, you'll catch it," Nephren added on to her explanation.

"I'm glad you're worried about me, but when you sleep, sleep in your own room." He lightly poked her forehead.

Aiseia, who had been standing off to the side quietly, eyed them suspiciously. "This situation seems like it should sound really dirty, but for some reason it doesn't."

"That means your mind hasn't been fully corrupted yet."

"Is that something to be happy about?" Aiseia asked. "Also, Nephren, you seem to be playing the role of a pet. Is that okay with you?"

"Moral support is important."

"I see." Aiseia nodded.

"... let's hurry up and go to breakfast." Willem pulled the still sleepy looking Nephren up.

"Oh, by the way, Mr. Technician, how has Kutori been lately?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh you know, I was just wonderin' how it felt to have someone going after you so hard. Feels good?"

"I won't deny it, but I don't need you asking about it."

"Ohoho." Aiseia looked surprised. "Are you interested?"

“I mean, I’m not an old man and I don’t have peculiar tastes. Even if she is a little young, is there any guy that feels absolutely nothing when a cute girl takes a liking to them? But even if she gets my heart pounding, I can’t accept those feelings. That’s why I’m trying to push her away.”

“Hmm?”

What am I saying ? Apparently, his weird dream was causing him to ramble on about weird things. If he said anymore it might start to get dangerous, so he shut his mouth tight.

“Don’t tell her,” he added on with a groan.

“I heard you were sleeping with Nephren?”

As Willem was walking down the hallway, someone suddenly grabbed his ear and started interrogating him. Enduring the pain, he turned around to see, as expected, a blue haired -- no, blue and red haired -- girl. An unhappy looking Kutori was glaring at him with a hint of anger in her eyes. It was… how to say… scary.

“Geez, why’s everyone gotta make such a big deal out of it…” He patted the hand latching onto his ear, trying to signal her to let go. “Don’t make it sound like more than it was. What’s wrong with an adult and a kid sleeping under the same blanket?”

“You’re not old enough to call yourself an adult.”

“Well, people often think I’m younger than I am, but I was born over five hundred years ago, you know?”

“I know. I also know you spent those five hundred years sleeping. So stop making that ‘clever comeback’ face.”

Ouch . Willem was pretty confident in that one.

“Anyways, I don’t think you would invite her to sleep with you, so I assume she just did it by herself, but…”

Obviously.

“I’m still not okay with it. You were bragging about how you lived through so many dangerous situations before, weren’t you? How did you not notice her snuggling right by you? What happened to being able to dodge a knife in your sleep?”

“This and that are completely different things. I can sniff out enemies. There’s no point in being cautious of people with no hostile intent, right?”

“Alright, well what if it was Naigrat? What would you have done?”

“I would have thrown her out the window within two seconds,” he answered immediately with confidence. It was an obvious answer. Only one with suicidal thoughts would get that close to a Troll who’s always blatantly expressing her appetite for

others.

"See? Your treatment would be different than with Nephren."

"No no you can't put them together even if she isn't an enemy when danger draws near of course I would respond because I don't want to die you know in the first place you could say she has hostile intent in a broader sense."

"Talking that fast makes only makes you sound more suspicious."

"... what do you want me to say…" Willem drooped his shoulders.

"I'll ask one more question. What would you have done if it was me?"

"Well of course--" He thought a bit. If he spoke carelessly here it would most likely turn out bothersome later on. It would also be quite a bother if she actually tried to test it out. "-- I'd kick you out, obviously."

He expected her to get angry, to say something like 'why does Nephren get to stay but I don't?'.

"Hmph." She still had that unsatisfied expression on her face, but she didn't inquire any further and released her hand from his ear. "Watch your behavior. You don't want the little ones picking up bad habits, do you?"

"O-Okay?"

Kutori gave him a light pat on the back before starting off down the hallway in a light jog.

Wha? Unable to grasp the situation, Willem stood there confused.

He was used to dealing with girls, but not women. So when it came to girls on the border between the two age groups, he never knew how to handle them, and even now, five hundred years later, he was still clueless.

But still, there was one thing he managed to detect.

"She's pushing herself too hard…"

Of course, he had no solid evidence. He simply got that impression from Kutori, who, at first glance, was acting perfectly normally.

Another fairy warehouse managers' meeting was held in Naigrat's room. Freshly baked scones sat on top of a plate, with three types of jam next to them. In the fireplace, the tea kettle whistled energetically.

"... is Collon's cold getting better?" Willem asked.

"We can't let our guard down yet. Her fever's started to

decrease, but it's still pretty high. Tomorrow I'm going to buy some medicine in town."

"I see… if in the middle of the night Collon sounds like she's having a nightmare or something, put this under her pillow," he said, then placed a shard of metal about the size of his palm on the table. It was just a plain old chunk of metal, with nothing special looking about it.

"What's this?"

"It's an ancient Talisman to ward off nightmares caused by colds. By itself, it has no race restrictions, and there's no need to put magic into it. Just place it under her pillow and it'll start working automatically."

"... didn't know you were holding on to such a convenient little thing."

"Well, I wasn't really holding on to it… it's part of the equipment here."

Naigrat looked at him questioningly. "Wait a second. If it's part of the equipment here, then I should've known about it. On top of that, I can't imagine the funds to buy such an expensive thing being approved. Not only is it a Talisman that any race can use, it's one that has a function unrelated to battle."

"You knew it was here, you just didn't know what it did." Willem tapped the metal shard with his fingers. "It came from right around the center of Seniolis' blade."

"Eh?"

"I told you, didn't I? Kaliyons are a collection of over 23 Talismans bound together by spell lines. Or in other words, if you undo the spell lines, you end up with at least 23 separate Talismans. By the way, Seniolis has 41 of these things."

"... Seniolis?"

"The other forty are pretty useless, so they've just been sitting in the storage room. They're all things like 'protection against cutting too much of your fingernails off when using a non magical blade' or 'a noise sounds whenever the user calls themselves anything other than their real name'."

"Return it immediately!!" Naigrat pounded her fist on the table. The teacups placed on it shook violently, but miraculously not even a single drop spilled. "What do you think those Kaliyons -- Dug Weapons are? They're literally the only thing keeping Regul Aire from sinking! And Seniolis is the most important and valuable one!"

"I know I know." Willem nodded. In fact, he probably knew Seniolis better than anyone alive now. That had both good and bad

implications, but…

"Then you should understand, shouldn't you? That you shouldn't be ripping apart the sword just to get this convenient little charm! Get your priorities straight!"

"I was wondering where you were going with this." He let out a small laugh. "Collon getting a good night's sleep is obviously more important than the fate of this world."

"That contradicts the entire reason for this warehouse's existence!" Naigrat facepalmed.

"Relax relax, that was 80% a joke. It's not like I'm a complete idiot. There aren't any enemy attacks predicted to happen soon, and in the first place Seniolis' user can't even wield it at the moment. The sword won't get to see any action for a while, right?"

"That's not the problem…" she sighed deeply. "Alright, whatever. As long as word doesn't get out no one will get mad at us, and it's not like I don't want to help Collon get better too… put it back together when you're done using it, okay?"

"Leave it to me. You're always able to understand things in the end. I like that part of you."

"I don't need your compliments. I'm in a bout of self hatred right now." Naigrat shook her head a few times before taking a sip of tea. That seemed to help her calm down. "By the way, do you still have that Talisman? You know, the one you used right after waking up… the language one."

"Right here." Willem patted his chest. "Haven't used it since I learned the common language though. It conveys the very will of the speaker itself using language as an intermediary, so you can't pick up on all the subtleties of conversation."

"I was thinking, couldn't you have easily paid off all your debt if you sold that?"

"Well, technically this is one of the treasures that Grick and his team dug up that day, right? So I've basically been borrowing it this whole time. I'll need to return it eventually."

"But wasn't it originally yours way back then?"

"By that logic, I could claim a few of these Kaliyons around here as mine. Even though I couldn't use any of the high class ones, I tried out quite a number of the average swords. That reminds me, did you ever figure out what to do about Tiat's sword?"

"We're still testing a few candidates. Right now Ignareo is looking like a good fit."

"That one's also more on the average side. Well, I suppose that's a good thing."

“That’s right. Of course given my position I’m not supposed to be happy about it, so it’s kind of a complicated feeling.”

Kaliyons could only be used by the Braves.

To the Braves, strength was a necessity. They were the ones who carried on arcane techniques. The ones who suffered great tragedy from birth. The ones who offered both heart and soul to their duty. The few who had a background which could convince anyone of their worthiness to wield immense power were the only ones who could actually receive such power.

If one could only wield a mediocre blade, it meant that the necessity was weak in them. It meant they had no need to throw away their life to worthless things like fate or tragedy or duty.

“Did you know? Tiat said she wanted a sword as strong as Seniolis… that she wanted to become strong enough to take over Kutori’s place.”

“I know all too well how she feels, but it looks like that’s not going to happen,” Willem said with a wry smile as he reached out for a cup of tea. He took a sip. It seemed a little more bitter than what they usually drank in Naigrat’s room. He didn’t know too much about tea, but he figured she must have changed the leaves or something. “It’s not easy to get its approval. That’s why I’m here now.”

Sensing a gap in their conversation, Willem brought up a subject that suddenly popped up into his mind: his exchange with Kutori earlier. As he finished, Naigrat burst out laughing. “I don’t believe I was telling a joke.”

“I-I know, that’s why it’s funny.” Naigrat’s voice shook from her continued laughter. “You really can be awkward sometimes, even though it’s not like you’re unaware.”

“I don’t get it…”

“She was happy because you said you would treat her the same way as you would treat me,” Naigrat, finally calming down, explained as she wiped her eyes.

“Why would she be happy receiving the same treatment as a Troll?”

“I’m the love rival she’s most concerned about. If she gets the same treatment as me, that means she’s being treated as an adult, right?”

“Ah, I see.” Willem grabbed a scone, spread some apricot jam on it, then stuffed it in his mouth. There was quite a lot of sweetness, but it was neutralized somewhat by the bitter taste of the tea still lingering on his tongue. He was a bit impressed by Naigrat’s arrangement. “Wait… love rival?”

“Your reaction’s a bit slow.”

“It was so unexpected it took a while to process. So what’s the deal? Does Kutori think we’re gonna end up together or something?”

“Well it could use some elaboration, but yes that’s the main idea.”

“I see. I think I understand now.” He chewed his scone. “It’s true that you’re the only adult woman around here… I guess it would seem natural from the perspective of a girl that age.”

“Hmm… that’s about right, but there’s one point you should correct.”

“What’s that?”

“You don’t need to say ‘of a girl that age’. I share the same perspective too.”

Not grasping what she meant immediately, Willem thought for a bit. While contemplating, he unconsciously took a sip of tea.

“I have a pretty high opinion of you.”

Willem choked. All the bitter tea went down the wrong way, obstructing his breathing.

Watching Willem squirm in agony with a smile, Naigrat rested her chin on her interlaced hands and continued. “I wouldn’t mind being together with someone like you. I’m serious. You have a promising future, you talk bad about Trolls but you’re nice at heart, we already know that we respect each other’s work, you like kids, we have similar tastes, we’re both markless, you’re face isn’t too bad, you seem like you could control my father when he goes on his drunken rampages, and above all you look delicious. See? You’re an excellent candidate.”

“Hold on a minute. I feel like there were a few weird ones in that last half.”

“So that means the ones in the first half were true?”

No… Or at least, that shouldn’t be the case, but Willem couldn’t find the right words to object.

“Besides, the demon races are said to have branched off from the Emnetwyte, so our races should actually be pretty close. That means I might be able to give you family who bear your blood. And I can’t think of a more certain reason for you to continue living in this world than if you were to have children of your own. If I could do anything to give you happiness five, ten years down the road, then that would make me happy too. That’s the number one reason why I wouldn’t mind being together with you.”

Willem couldn’t sincerely accept her words. However, one

thing was clear: Naigrat was serious. Her mischievous face and playful tone were simply Naigrat's way of hiding her true emotions.

"Well, right now making Kutori happy is more important to me, so I don't plan on taking action for the time being. So anyways, that's why Kutori is so concerned about me. Do you understand now?"

"Let me ask one despicable question." Wallowing in self hatred, Willem groaned.

"What is it?"

"Can I pretend I didn't hear any of what you just said?"

"That really is despicable. But, that's fine with me." Naigrat laughed.

She showed no signs of her feelings being hurt, yet despite that Willem couldn't bring himself to look her in the eyes anymore.

Part 3: The Young at Heart Lizard

There are two types of people in this world: those who you can have a relaxing cup of tea with, and everyone else.

Willem was located on the 68th Floating Island, downtown, in his usual restaurant. The beast man shop owner was so scared out of his wits that Willem felt sorry for him. An apology might be necessary afterwards, but the poor guy would need to hold out a bit longer.

"They don't have tea here, so I can never decide what to drink... " Naigrat said as she glanced over the menu.

"I will have medicinal water," declared a large Reptrace man sitting in a chair entirely too small for his humongous body.

"Ah… I'll have coffee," Willem said.

"Then I'll go with that too… can I order some food too?" Without waiting for either of their responses, Naigrat called over the chef, told him all of their orders, and even added an utterly unnecessary joke at the end. "If you take too long with our orders, I'll eat you."

The shop owner's fur all shot up abruptly, and Willem could tell that his face had gone completely pale, despite it being physically impossible to see behind the fur.

"Hey, you don't need to be threatening people like that."

"I wasn't threatening him. It was just a cute little joke of encouragement," Naigrat protested.

"Alright, there's a bookstore over on that corner. Today's the day you finally buy a common language dictionary."

"Again with that?"

“I’m just trying to help you out.”

As Willem and Naigrat were going back and forth, Limeskin opened his mouth and let out a hearty cackle. “I see you two are very close now.”

“Not really,” Willem answered.

To learn common sense, one must first recognize what is not common sense. To correct the misconceptions of this Troll lady, someone needs to be by her and point out right from wrong. It just so happened that Willem was the only one in such a position to do so, and that was what he was doing. That was it, nothing more.

“... well anyways, what’s this little meeting today for? I assume you didn’t call this big lizard all the way over here just so he could enjoy a vacation.”

“Oh? So you can tell that I’m not here for official business?”

“Anyone could tell by looking at you.”

Looking back, Willem felt like he had bumped into Limeskin quite frequently. On top of Garakuta Tower on the 28th Island. The harbor district on the 68th Island. The Winged Guard headquarters in Collinadiluche. All of those times, he had been wearing his (probably specially made) army uniform. The imposing look that his giant body created together with his army uniform had left a strong impression on Willem.

His look now, however…

“What kind of fashion sense is that?”

“My daughter chose it. I am quite pleased with it as well.”

“... I see.”

It was… casual to say the least. The lizard wore a leather jacket over a plain linen shirt. A few decorative braids that young Orcs might be into were sewn onto the shoulders. All together, when combined with the milky white color of his skin, or rather scales, his outfit produced a truly uncomfortable feeling. Sometimes Willem thought he could see how everything went well together, but other times… just no.

“She looks like her mother, with glamorous scales and a beautiful face.”

“I never asked…”

Willem didn’t even know he had a daughter before. If Limeskin was about to start bragging about his daughter, though, he had better be ready for a counter brag. Well, his daughters weren’t exactly daughters by blood and he wasn’t going to start comparing their looks with a lizard’s, but Willem would definitely win that battle. He decided to keep quiet, however, foreseeing that such a

conversation could easily end up in a mess.

"Willem, your desire to brag about your own daughters in return is showing on your face," Naigrat pointed out.

"As the commander during the defeat earlier, I have been restrained. For a short while, I will not be able to don my uniform."

"A rather light punishment."

The defeat Limeskin referred to was the battle in which the entire 15th Island fell. Considering the heavy responsibility that should have come with such a large scale loss and the light punishment actually received, Willem figured that the restraint must have just been for appearances. Whether it was directed towards the rest of the Winged Guard or the common people he didn't know, but the lack of serious consequences must have been a way to hide all the classified information regarding the incident.

An organization is a living being by itself. In order to live on, many wasteful and unreasonable things need to be carried out. It appeared to Willem that those bothersome aspects hadn't changed much in five hundred years.

"I do not need pity. The body of a warrior occasionally requires rest. I am enjoying this time off."

That much Willem could tell. The old (or so Willem guessed) man was quite visibly excited about his rare opportunity to wear something new and relax.

Naigrat cleared her throat. "Let's move on to the main topic."

Ah . Even though he initially asked about that himself, Willem forgot that they had actual issues to discuss.

"First, I want to talk about what to do with Kutori from now on. Her current condition is unprecedented in the fairy warehouse."

"Hm."

As Naigrat began to speak, the food they ordered was carried over to them on violently trembling plates. One extremely stinky cup of medicinal water, two cups of coffee, and one order of sandwiches with thick bacon strips in them.

"Since the fairies are considered weapons, there's no official protocol for retirement or discharge. According to the documents, she's still a fairy soldier, even though she's no longer actually a fairy. I want to arrange with the company and the army for her to be withdrawn from the front lines."

"So she is no longer a fairy -- this is true?"

Limeskin's question was very reasonable. Not many people would believe it if they heard that someone suddenly changed their entire species. Willem himself still found it difficult to come to terms

with. However…

"We've checked it many times, but the result has never changed."

When told by the person who made the discovery herself, who must have doubted and carefully reconfirmed it more than anyone, it became impossible to deny. Common sense needed to go out the window.

"Can we change the entire system somehow? It's obviously not adequate enough to cover the current situation," Willem asked.

"It'll take a long time to get such a change to go through. It could be years. And if she gets an order to go to battle during that time, it'll all be for nothing."

"I can do something about the orders to a certain extent," Limeskin remarked.

"Okay. Then I'll ask you to please do what you can to that 'certain extent'. I wanted to ask you in person, that's why I had you come here today."

"The soldier inside of me cannot respond to such an unjust request," Limeskin said before taking a sip of his medicinal water.

He had a dignified air around him, like that of a wise old man, completely contrary to his youngster outfit. Willem wondered how old he actually was. The large variation in the body sizes of the Reptrace is due to individual differences in the ages they stop growing at. Given that Limeskin was humongous, he must have spent a pretty long time growing. He also held the high rank of First Officer and apparently had a daughter, so Willem imagined he had lived for quite a number of years.

"However, right now I am a citizen on vacation. I accept your request with full heart and soul."

"Thank you." Naigrat breathed a brief sigh of relief.

The Naigrat sitting before Willem seemed somewhat more mature than usual. A different aura surrounded her than when she was at the warehouse playing with the little ones. With them, she seemed like an old older sister, or a young mother.

"... so listening to you guys talk just now, I realized something…" Willem wasn't too fond of the adult way of doing things, and he wasn't particularly good at it either. But that was probably true for his two companions as well, so Willem figured it wasn't the time to be caring about that sort of thing. "The Great Sage. How connected is he with the army?"

Limeskin's shoulders shook slightly. "He is the highest advisor of the Winged Guard. He holds almost no formal authority,

but his words carry great influence."

"Perfect. Report to the army so that this highest advisor hears: 'The Second Enchanted Weapons Technician has chosen fairy soldier Kutori Nota Seniolis as a rare experiment subject in order to shed some light on the mystery riddled nature of the Leprechauns'."

Naigrat blinked in confusion. "Experiment? What do you mean?"

"Enchanted Weapons Technician is a research position, right? Then obviously I have the right to request materials and resources necessary for my research. I know it's just a title and whatever, but I should still be able to at least make a request. And if it goes through, that'll at least ensure that Kutori gets treated differently than the other fairies for the time being."

"That's if it goes through. Besides, the Great Sage, isn't he the one from the legend of the birth of Regul Aire? Why are we talking about him now?"

"He's an old friend. We've gotten used to making ridiculous requests at each other."

Naigrat eyed Willem as if he were a crazy hobo. Apparently, she wasn't convinced. Well, it's not like Willem needed her to believe him anyways.

"What will be the content of said experiments?" Limeskin asked.

"An observation of how removal from the battlefield affects the process of recovery from personality destruction. Specialized medicine will also be administered as needed. Say that."

"... so in other words?"

"Take her away from the battlefield and make her life her normal, everyday life. Might as well request some grocery funds for the warehouse while we're at it."

"If your plan is delivered to the ears of the Great Sage, the path will be opened?" Limeskin asked in his odd dialect.

"That's right."

Willem and the Great Sage's differences were made clear in their conversation back on the 2nd Island. The Great Sage was the guardian of Regul Aire and therefore looked at the big picture in the long run. Because of that, he cut his emotions away and viewed the fairies solely as military power. If he wasn't able to do that, Regul Aire would have fallen long ago. Willem could respect that, but he himself would never be able to accept such a view, and he didn't want to be able to either.

From the Great Sage's perspective, even though Kutori was the user of Seniolis, she's still just one fairy and deserves no special treatment. In order to continue protecting the world, he needs a system which can maintain the necessary military power in the long run. Willem predicted that, when faced with the request, the Great Sage would judge that they shouldn't needlessly pour so many resources into just one fairy, who might not even be able to fight ever again.

"When it comes down to it, he's a serious guy. Even if he doesn't want to do something, he will always find and execute the best possible solution to the situation facing him. So the best way to get him to choose a certain option is to add extra value for him onto it. If I ask him to let me take care of Kutori, he'll probably accept. I don't think he would so easily pass up an opportunity to make me indebted to him."

"... eh? Were you not joking when you said you were old friends?"

Ignoring Naigrat, Willem continued. "The real problems are that Kutori has been acting a bit strange lately and also the remaining military strength without Kutori. The burden will be too big for Aiseia and Nephren to bear with just the two of them--" He hesitated before finishing. "-- We need Tiat to be battle ready soon."

"Oh, about that." Naigrat raised her hand and darkened her expression. "We received contact from the Orlandri Trading Company this morning. The land survey expedition has been attacked by a large Beast, and the airship Saxifraga has fallen."

"Huh?"

"Hm…" Limeskin's expression also grew cloudy… probably.

"Did the warriors fight honorably?"

"The attack occurred in the evening, just before they took off. The two of them successfully repelled the attack and, fortunately, were exhausted but not injured. But unfortunately, they're currently stuck on land day and night. The situation is looking pretty grim," Naigrat explained.

"I see. So I assume we must send a pair of wings to go meet them?" Limeskin asked.

"Probably. But large ships capable of descending to the land are few and far between. It might take some time to prepare one."

"Like stabbing a dragon's scale with a needle, huh? I hope they remain unharmed."

Willem had absolutely no idea why the two of them suddenly started talking about some survey mission or whatever. As far as he

knew, they were just talking about the remaining military power left in the fairy warehouse. How was an expedition sent by the company to survey the land related at all to that? He was thoroughly baffled.

"Wait a second guys. I demand an explanation."

The Troll and the Reptrace both turned to look at Willem.

"Explanation? Of what?"

"You know, of why you guys suddenly started talking about the land just now. I mean, sure finding a new Kaliyon could be nice, but that doesn't change the fact that Aiseia and Nephren's burden will be too large."

"Why?" Naigrat was thoroughly baffled. She looked up and thought for a bit.

Now, it wasn't too rare for Naigrat to suddenly start acting strangely, and Willem had grown used to it, but it was neither the time nor place for such antics.

"Aha! I see. That's right that's right. It's only been a month since you've arrived here." Naigrat giggled cheerfully. "I've become so used to seeing our desperate and awkward father around that I forgot."

"Hey, take back the desperate and awkward part."

"So you accept the father part?"

"Just tell me. Who have you guys been talking about?"

"Hmm, let's see… how many fully grown fairy soldiers do you think there are in the warehouse?"

"Excluding Kutori, three. If you don't count the swordless Tiat, then two."

"Nope, the right answer is five. Aisea, Noft, Nephren, Lantolq, and lastly Tiat."

Willem looked at the ceiling and thought a bit. "There are two names I don't recognize. Where have they been hiding?"

"You should be able to tell from our conversation. That way." Naigrat pointed her finger downwards.

Willem could see nothing on top of the table. There wasn't anything of note on the floor either. The place Naigrat indicated with her gesture was far, far beyond. He stole one of the bacon sandwiches in front of Naigrat, shoved it in his mouth, chewed for a while, swallowed, then put into words the first thought that spilled out from the depths of his heart.

"For real?"

It was for real.

The Troll and Reptrace both nodded in sync.

Part 4: Gray Days Upon the Gray Land

Meanwhile, back on land, things were progressing pretty much as Naigrat had described to Willem and Limeskin. The land survey ship Saxifraga was attacked and sunk by a Beast.

It appeared suddenly during a fierce sandstorm. It's silhouette somewhat resembled that of a human. From a distance, you could make out an abdomen, a head, and limbs. But if you drew any closer, that impression of similarity would soon go flying out the window. The giant body the size of a small house. The dark red shell covering that entire body. The countless eyeballs peeking through the cracks of that shell.

The Twisting and Engulfing Fourth Beast. The Legiteimitat.

Like all Beasts, its motives remain unknown. The goal of most living beings is, in a narrow sense and a broad sense, to live on, the narrow sense meaning the survival of the individual and the broad sense meaning the survival of an entire species in the long term. The primal instincts to eat, sleep, and mate can all be tied to these two goals. All living beings are born with, live with, and die with these two desires carved into them.

But apparently, for the Beasts this is not so.

Not much is known about their reproductive processes, but they don't seem to think very much about their personal survival. They do anything it takes, including throwing away their own lives, to kill.

The sole goal in their minds has not changed one bit in five hundred years: to annihilate all that lives. Or to destroy all that moves. Perhaps they do not even bother to distinguish between the two.

The Legiteimitat is one of the most commonly encountered Beasts on the land, but is also known as one of the relatively less dangerous ones. They seek out their prey by relying on sound and movement. If you shut your mouth and freeze as soon as you run into one, then slowly creep away, there's a possibility that you'll escape with your life. That is the reason why the 4ths are considered to be less dangerous than the others. Such knowledge is common sense among the salvagers, and was spread to all members of the expedition in a briefing before the mission started.

Despite that, a panic broke out immediately upon sighting.

Expedition members tried to run for their lives, only to be run down and sliced in half. Their screams and fountains of blood only caused further panic to erupt, which then lead to even more

casualties.

That, however, was only the beginning.

At the time, the First Machinery Technician in charge of the expedition was aboard the grounded airship Saxifraga. When he saw the tragedy unfolding through the window, he let out a scream and flew into the control room. There, he tried to start up the spell incinerator and takeoff, threatening the real pilots with his ceremonial sword as he did so.

The Legiteimitat seeks its prey by relying on sound and movement.

It didn't take long for the thundering noise of the spell incinerator to reach its ears. The monster, with its giant body the size of a small mountain, sprinted across the sand at a terrifying speed, raised its arms, and swung them down upon its prey. A violent crushing sound rang throughout the air as the armored ship split apart as if it were made out of mere fabric. Ballast rained from the sky. The ship, which had hardly gotten off the ground, tilted wildly as it ruptured.

A short time after, the two Leprechauns finally arrived on the battlefield and swiftly dealt with the Beast, ending the commotion almost as quickly as it had started. The casualties totaled in at eighteen people, around half of the original expedition. All the horses they brought to carry luggage were also annihilated. And, most importantly, the sunken Saxifraga had lost the ability to fly ever again.

The sun sank below the horizon.

Everyone was exhausted.

Unfortunately, the airship was now no more than a giant wreck. With nothing much they could really do, about half of the survivors snuck into tents and tried to find solace in sleep. The rest lit a fire and sat idly around it.

"-- You young ladies did well," the Borgle man said as he held a skewer of meat over the bonfire. The flames crackled softly as they slowly cooked the bits of horse. "That kind of mess would usually end up in complete annihilation. It's a miracle that this many survived. Let's focus on that, not how many passed away."

"Can you really say that we survived?" Noft muttered as she stared at the fire from the comfort of a blanket. "With no ship, we can't get back to Regul Aire, you know?"

"We've sent messenger ships up. If we just hang out around here for a bit, help will come sooner or later."

"Hang out, huh?" She bit into the grilled meat on her skewer.

“From now on when night comes we can’t just hide up in the sky. We’re on the sand 24/7. We may be able to deal with one or two, but if we get too many guests Lan and I won’t be able to handle it with just the two of us.”

“Now now, no need to be so pessimistic. At the very least, we won’t be seeing a 4th for a while,” Grick said as he held a new skewer to the flames.

“What do you mean?”

“The Legiteimitat have a habit of not living near each other. So it’s pretty safe to assume that there aren’t any other 4ths around where the last one appeared.”

“Never heard that before.” Noft opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“It’s pretty common knowledge among us salvagers. The other Beasts don’t move around too much, so if we just sit tight that should keep danger to a minimum. Of course, can’t be too optimistic though.”

“Hmm…” Amazed at her newly acquired knowledge, Noft turned to the girl sitting beside her. “Did ya know that, Lan?”

No response. The blue haired girl curled up in her blanket simply continued to stare intently at the dancing flames, showing no signs of even the slightest movement.

“... what’s wrong? Is she tired?” Grick asked.

“Nah, she gets like this once she starts thinking about something. She disappears into her own little world and stops picking up voices or anything that’s going on around her.”

Noft took a skewer of meat and, after checking that it was hot, shoved it into Lantolq’s mouth.

“Wha-!?” That seemed to do the trick. “Blrgh agrh!” After a brief moment of utter confusion, her cheeks turned bright red. *Hot hot hot hot!* The legs and arms flailing about under her blanket seemed to scream silently, but still she made no attempt to spit out the source of the problem sitting inside her mouth.

“You shouldn’t get so caught up in your thoughts while eating. As Naigrat used to always tell you, respect your food by focusing on it,” Noft said in a lecturing voice as she stuck a new piece of meat on the skewer. “Geez, if I left you alone you would’ve spaced out until your meat burned up into ashes. It’s our first proper meal in a long time, if you don’t enjoy it fully the horses will have died for nothing.”

“T-That doesn’t mean you have to shove a skewer in my mouth!”

“Before you complain, eat some vegetables too. They’re

starting to burn, you know?"

"Okay okay, enough already!" Still red in the face, Lantolq picked up one of the skewers lying beside the bonfire.

"I'd leave the skewers on this side alone if I were you. I doubt the flavors meant for Borgles to enjoy will receive a very warm welcome from you young ladies."

"I know!"

"But now that you say that, it kinda makes me want to try it just once, you know?" Noft said.

"Noft! Don't be rude!"

As Noft and Lantolq went back and forth, Grick suddenly started laughing.

"... um, is something wrong, Grick?"

"Oh, no. I was just thinking you two are more like regular teenage girls than I expected. Well, I heard that from an acquaintance, but I never really believed it. I guess since you all are Regul Aire's last line of defense I expected you to be more soldier-like, or given up on life and sulking or something. Instead I find a pair of cute young ladies."

"Hmm? That's the first time anyone's called me cute," Noft said with a laugh.

"I'd say I'm pretty sulky myself," Lantolq added as she blew on a piping hot skewered vegetable.

Munching on a burnt carrot, Lantolq thought deeply.

Countless mysteries surround the Beasts. Or more like, there's nothing but mysteries. Five hundred years ago, everyone gave up on trying to know more about them. And in the past five hundred years, no one ever dared to restart that investigation. The hideous calamities unleashed upon the world by the detested race, the Emnetwyte. For five hundred years, no one ventured to think beyond that vague description.

Lantolq remembered.

The Emnetwyte should not have come into existence. Their creation was the first and greatest mistake of the Visitors.

A sentence she deciphered herself from an ancient excavated text. The next part she had quite a bit of trouble with, but after further thought she figured it went something like this.

As for the humans, the beasts were released, and they filled the world with the gray truth.

However, it was probably a mistranslation. After all, Lantolq hadn't actually thoroughly studied the Emnetwyte language. She just knew some basic grammar and a few words. It was only natural that

she made a mistake or two trying to read such a difficult text.

It had to be a mistake. If not, it wouldn't make any sense. The humans created the Beasts and unleashed them upon the world. But this sentence, at least based on Lantolq's interpretation, made it sound like the Beasts weren't created by the humans at all, but rather…

"What did I just tell you? Stop drifting off, it's bad for digestion!"

"Blrgh--!?"

This time, a rather toasty potato had found its way into her mouth. *Hot hot hot hot!*

Part 5: The 49th Floating Island

Now, how does one go about descending from the sky all the way down to the land?

The simplest method… well, even a baby knows that. Go to the very edge of your floating island, and take one more step. After literally flying over one thousand malumel, you'll at least be able to give mother earth a great big kiss. Moreover, the fee is only one life. How cheap!

If for some reason such a method is not to your liking, well then you're kind of out of luck. Upon searching for the second simplest method, one encounters a rather sharp spike in difficulty. And if you insist on adding the condition that you want to actually return home after descending, the difficulty only increases more.

It is said that an enormous barrier surrounds the entirety of Regul Aire. If a regular airship tries to cross this barrier, it loses all control and becomes unable to fly properly. There are special procedures which can be done on a ship to prevent this, but of course they cost a significant amount of money and time, making them essentially inaccessible to most people.

The Plantaginesta, an elite class transport airship scheduled to pick up the survivors and recovered goods of the land expedition, required about six days to get prepared, even with work proceeding as fast as possible.

Willem had all that explained to him in a Winged Guard base on the 49th Floating Island.

"And why do we need such a large ship?"

"Choose your words carefully, Second Technician. I'm a First Technician, you know? I'm an important person," a Gremian in an army uniform said with a sour face.

The little Gremian barely rose higher than Willem's waist,

making it very easy to look down on his shoulders. Sewn onto one of them was, just as promised, the insignia of a First Technician. It was at this moment that Willem remembered something that probably should have been very obvious: the army puts heavy emphasis on the rank hierarchy. In the past, he fought with the armies of the empire and the old kingdom a few times, but he never belonged to them.

"My apologies, First Technician. I come from a humble town in the borderlands, please have mercy on me."

"Uh… yeah. That's good." The Gremian seemed to be thrown off by Willem's sudden change in attitude, but his mood improved. "Now, what was it? Why we need such a large ship? Very well, since I am such a kind First Technician, I shall enlighten you. After all, I am a kind hearted First Technician."

God damn, this guy's annoying, Willem thought in the back of his mind as he bowed with a smile and said, "Thank you, kind hearted First Technician."

"Very well." The Gremian, now in the merriest of moods, started talking. "To put it simply, we have a lot to carry. This expedition was sent out due to the discovery of a relatively well preserved Emnetwyte village. It was expected to yield many artifacts, which was why it was such a long expedition, and according to reports, relics which we cannot afford to leave on the ground have been discovered."

"... everyday this rescue mission is delayed, the survivors' situation only gets more and more dangerous."

The Gremian made a face that said 'what the heck is this guy talking about?'. "They were sent down there to obtain the lost wisdom of ancient times. I'm sure everyone in the expedition acknowledged the risks beforehand. Besides, you know right? Two of our anti-Beast weapons were sent with them. I'm sure they will be of use."

"....."

The air in the room seemed to freeze.

Outside the window, a bird fell from the sky.

A cat napping beneath a tree shrieked and dashed away.

The soldiers inside the building carrying out their various duties were suddenly assaulted by unexplainable, severe chills. Some fell from their chairs. Some screamed. Some looked around cautiously.

"Your face muscles seem to be twitching, is something wrong?" The Gremian asked with a blank face, completely oblivious to the changes occurring around him.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking how right you were, wise First Technician.”

“I see. The facial expressions of the markless are always hard to read. Oh, by the way, I have just the right document. Even though you’re a lowly Second Technician, I’m sure you’ll be able to understand the importance of this expedition after seeing this.”

A file was thrust in front of Willem’s face. It was a bundle of a few pieces of paper bound together by string, probably a report. In sloppy handwriting, the title read ‘Report of the Second Expedition to Ground Level Ruins K96-MAL’. While he was listening to the little man talk, Willem had been thinking that he didn’t really give a crap what was found down there, but the file drew his attention. A fair amount of resources and personnel were poured into the expedition. What were the army and Orlandri after?

“May I have the privilege of reading them?”

“You can’t take them anywhere.”

Willem grabbed hold of the bundle and opened it. The first few pages only contained coordinates, route data, and other technical information completely incomprehensible to Willem, so he skipped over them. Next came a map of the ruins along with some basic facts based on their findings. Apparently, five hundred years ago, in place of the ruins there stood a village home to about three thousand Emnetwyte. Cheaply built housing complexes lined the wide stone paved streets. A large building thought to be the town hall sat towards the northeast. A forest probably surrounded the village at the time. A total of four rivers flowed through the area, two of which were artificially redirected to be used as waterways or something similar.

“.....”

Wow, a lot of this stuff is pretty accurate , Willem thought. The population of the town really was around three thousand, the streets were covered with cheap looking stone, and there was a big forest surrounding it. They were two short on the number of rivers, but the layout of the town shown on the map matched exactly that of the village once known as Gomag -- Willem’s hometown.

He searched for a particular building on the outskirts of the town. Five hundred years ago, it was already worn down and just about falling apart. He couldn’t find it. Maybe the expedition didn’t go that far out, or maybe any traces of it had simply disappeared over the years.

“There’s nothing interesting there. Next page, next page.” The Gremian urged him on.

The next page contained a simple list of uncovered artifacts: Talismans, pottery, paintings, books. Willem felt as if his head had become filled with lead. His eyes passed over the words written in the list, but their meanings failed to register in his mind.

"This report was made based off of the most recent report which arrived by messenger ship just the other day. In other words, the artifacts listed there are still down on the ground, waiting for us to pick them up."

Who cares? Willem thought. If they wanted Emnetwyte drawings so bad, he could make some right now if they just gave him some paper and a pen. If they wanted a vase, he could make one. If they wanted books, he could write them a grand masterpiece which transcended the ages.

And then, Willem's eyes spotted a word that he couldn't graze over. "Dug Weapon… Lapidem Sybilis!?"

"Yes, apparently that name was carved into the hilt. They are saying it looks like a pretty high quality sword too, so with that, the protection of Regul Aire will grow all the more stronger."

The cheerful First Technician went on about something, but his words went in one of Willem's ears and straight out the other. Lapidem Sybilis. The Unwavering Defender of Life. The Kaliyon that Willem's old comrade Navrutri once used. But why was it found there in Gomag? Navrutri went with them to fight the Visitors. Almost the entire continent stood between Gomag and Tifana, the site of the battlefield.

But wait…

"Lapidem! That's the answer!" The world in front of Willem's eyes seemed to suddenly grow brighter and sparkle.

"O-Okay?"

Willem grabbed the Gremian's arm and shook it up and down rapidly. "This is a marvelous finding, gallant First Technician! The expedition has truly accomplished a momentous task! We must retrieve those brave men and their artifacts right away!"

"Y-Yes, I'm glad to see you understand now." The Gremian nodded repeatedly, somewhat overwhelmed by Willem's strange behavior. "Well speaking of that, I was thinking that we will need a guard on board the Plantaginesta with us, so I want to bring one Dug Weapon along with its user."

Willem thought for a bit. His request was, of course, not very surprising. At the present, there are no predictions of a Teimerre attack on a floating island. The predictions are always accurate, and moreover can even determine the scale of an attack. In other words,

no large battles will occur in Regul Aire in the near future, which meant that taking a fairy soldier away would incur only a very small risk. It made sense for the Company to request an escort, it was logical of the Winged Guard to accept that, and so naturally it wouldn't make much sense for a superficial Second Technician to try to refuse on emotional terms.

He thought some more. "... I have one request, generous First Technician."

"Hmm?"

"Would it be possible to prepare one more seat on this airship?"

Willem left his room, exited the Winged Guard base, and quickly walked down the countryside road towards the Second City of the 49th Floating Island.

The closer a floating island's number is to one, the closer to the center of the group it floats. And generally, the lower the number, the more developed and populated the island is. All the big cities can pretty much be found on islands below 40, and islands above 70 pretty much consist of untouched nature. The 49th Island fits in somewhere right smack dab in the middle. Accordingly, the city that Willem was headed towards can neither be called big nor small. It is truly average.

"Ah, you're here!" A bored looking Kutori, sitting at a cafe underneath a dark green parasol with an empty fruit juice glass and half eaten cake beside her, noticed Willem walking towards her across the plaza and waved. "Late! Do you know how long I've been waiting?"

"My bad my bad, had some stuff to deal with. Ready to go?"

"One second. I need to finish this." It seems she meant that quite literally, for the cake upon the plate in front of her disappeared in the blink of an eye. The feat was so impressive that even Willem, an experienced warrior, gawked in amazement.

"Mmmm." Kutori's face loosened into a broad, sloppy smile. Now Willem understood why she didn't like to eat sweets in front of the other girls in the warehouse. "Okay. Let's go shopping," she said as she stood up and put on her hat which had been occupying the neighboring seat.

Prejudice against the markless definitely wasn't very prevalent in the area, so there was no need to always keep their heads covered. Willem explained that to Kutori before they left the warehouse, but she simply said 'it doesn't matter' and took it anyway.

“What order should we go in? The bookstore should probably come last, since everyone decided to order a ton. It might be a bit heavy to walk around with all of them,” Kutori said.

“You look like you’re having fun.”

“Is that so? I’m sure it’s just your imagination.” She started walking. “I rarely get a chance to walk outside alone with you, so maybe that’s it. No, not rarely, this is the first time, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?” Willem sighed. “When we first met we went around all over the place. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten.”

“Ah… that’s right. Ahaha.” Kutori tried to laugh it off. “Well now, let’s not get caught up in the small details. If we don’t hurry, we won’t make it home before the sun sinks.”

“Small details?”

Willem’s question was met with a frightening glare.

It was truly an average city. The economy wasn’t too prosperous. Hardly any tourists came to sightsee. The population was neither large nor small. There was neither extreme safety nor rampant crime. The city had almost no distinctive features, making it hard to come up with any adjective to describe it with other than ‘average’. The city was simply made for the comfort of its residents. A group of Borgle children waving sticks in the air energetically ran about the quaint little brick alleys and small staircases which filled the gaps between the larger buildings.

They ended up with much more luggage than Willem expected. To rest their arms for a bit, they decided to stop at a pleasant looking park.

“Hey,” Willem said as they sat down next to each other on a bench.

“Hm?”

“Are you really okay with this? You’re finally able to move freely outside the island, you know? Is following me around while I’m shopping really all you want to--”

“Stop right there. You don’t need to ask questions you already know the answer to.” Kutori pointed at Willem accusingly. “Outside or inside the island, doesn’t matter. I just wanted to be with you, that’s all.”

Willem thought she’d say something like that.

“Well, there are places I want to go and things I want to see, but being with you takes priority, so there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Willem sighed. The tragedy unfolding before him was the result

of an innocent girl, who grew up knowing nothing of men, having a coincidental dramatic meeting one day. The feelings that resulted from such a fairy tale like encounter were strong, pure, yet cruel.

"What about me do you even like so much?"

"Not telling." Kutori laughed.

A brief comfortable silence descended between them. The feeling that he wouldn't mind if they stayed in this moment for eternity ever so slightly welled up inside of Willem.

"I was ordered to send one fairy soldier aboard the airship headed towards the land." He broke the silence in a soft, gentle voice.

"Mm."

"It's too soon for Tiat, so she's not an option. It was a hard choice between the remaining two, but I've decided to send Nephren."

"Mm."

"And also, after talking directly with my supervisor, I got myself a seat too."

"... mm?" Kutori turned to face Willem. "What?"

"Unlike the time on the 15th Island, there's not some barrier or whatever preventing my entry. If I want to follow them I can. One reason is that I don't want to wait for her to come home again." Willem started counting on his fingers. "The second is that the name of a certain sword was on the list of treasures uncovered by the expedition. If it's the real thing, I want to get it as soon as possible."

"Sword?"

Ignoring her question, Willem gazed up at the sky. "You've been pushing yourself too hard recently, haven't you?"

"... what are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. I can imagine what's going based on your attitude lately. You've lost some memories, haven't you? Or maybe they're still disappearing as we speak?"

A waffle cart parked on the road just outside the park and opened for business. A sweet scent filled the area. Children everywhere began pestering their parents for money. Even parents that strictly refused at first changed their attitudes as the fragrance reached their noses. 'It's right before dinner.' 'You don't want to get in the habit of impulse buying food.' 'Fine, just this once.' 'Excuse me, one hazel paste and one berry collection.'

"How could you tell?" Kutori asked.

"Like I said, just by watching you I could get a good idea."

For a while now, Willem had sensed something off about

Kutori's attitude. And as he observed her, he noticed something for the first time, something that he never would have picked up on if he hadn't been watching so closely.

"I see… you were looking out for me."

"Did you ever think I wasn't?"

"Of course not, but…" Her expression looked happy yet distressed at the same time.

"-- I'll warn you now to not get your hopes up at what I'm about to say. It's no more than a slight possibility." Willem took a breath, then began his explanation. "The sword I was talking about earlier had a Talent which preserved the condition of the user's mind and body. I saw it render memory destruction and emotion control attacks useless with my own eyes. If we had that sword, it might be able to solve that problem of yours."

Kutori blinked once. "You… say some pretty ridiculous things with a straight face."

"Well, the first step to making those ridiculous things into a reality is to put them into words."

"I don't think that's something to be saying proudly." Kutori laughed.

The owner of the waffle cart's energetic voice reached their ears. 'Thank you, thank you very much.'

"Okay, I won't get my hopes up. But I can trust that you'll never give up, right?"

"Of course," Willem answered.

"So, about how long will you be gone?"

"No idea. Maybe like ten days? Or maybe a bit longer."

"... I'm going too," Kutori mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I said, I'm going too. You're not the only one who doesn't want to wait at home."

"What?"

"It's okay. I still remember Noft and Lan, although I was never really close with them."

"No no no, that'll never get approved. It's not like we have tons of free space on the ship. We can't afford to bring someone with no skills along just so they can have a look around…"

Kutori's face gradually turned into that of a demon. Willem, realizing his fault, shrunk back a bit.

"Do you really think I want to go just to 'have a look around'?"

"... no, that's not what I meant. You know, the land is a dangerous place and not somewhere you should go so casually…

ah.” His tongue seemed to be having a bad day.

“Hmm? Does this look casual to you?”

“Ah, no… let’s talk after we calm down a bit.”

“I am going with you!”

“I’m telling you it’s not possible!”

A short while later, Willem found out that it was in fact possible after all. He went back on the road he came from towards the Winged Guard base and brought the situation up with the First Technician, who readily gave his approval. He simply scribbled Kutori’s name onto the end of the crew roster and handed Willem an identification card.

“-- Are you mad?” Kutori asked cautiously as they walked towards the harbor. “Your face looks kind of strange.”

Willem let out a big sigh. “Do you know why you got permission so easily?”

“Hmm… because the Second Technician introduced me?”

“That’s not a good enough reason to take a regular civilian along on an important mission without doing any kind of investigation into their background or skills.”

The governments on most islands don’t keep any sort of registry of their citizens. Because of the immense diversity of races and values all mixed together, neatly managing every resident with documents would be a difficult task indeed. Under the law on the majority of islands, citizenship is something that can simply be bought by paying taxes to the government. It gives certain convenient privileges, but is by no means necessary for life. For example, on the 28th Island, there were many neighborhoods, such as the one where Willem lived, where almost no one had official citizenship. Well, that led to a significant decrease in public order. Anyways, Kutori, having just lost her status as fairy soldier, was now no more than a civilian.

“Usually, to go along on an army mission, you would definitely need proof that you have the skills necessary to not drag everyone down and also the trust of the officers. There’s no such thing as being too careful when considering a civilian to take along.”

“But I got permission.”

“Basically, in the past there have been other officers who took along a civilian as their secretary. And all of those secretaries were probably of the opposite sex.”

“Umm…?” Kutori didn’t seem to be following.

The First Technician’s irritating smile when Willem returned to the base with Kutori popped into his head. “They were taking

along their lovers, calling them secretaries."

"... lovers." Kutori repeated the word slowly, as if it were new vocabulary from a foreign language.

"So he thought I was doing the same thing."

"... ah… I see." She thought for a bit, then said, "What's wrong with that?"

"Everything…"

"Well, then maybe say that I'm your wife or something?"

"That's not the problem…"

Somewhere far off in the distance, the bells of a carillon began their melodic ringing. Willem stopped walking for a moment and listened to that nostalgic performance until the end. The sun began to dip below the horizon. Twilight had descended.

"Well, I guess it didn't turn out too bad. There's not really any use in trying to correct the misunderstanding, and it's not like I want to be separated from you either."

"I'm glad to hear that, but that's still not a proposal is it?"

"Of course not," Willem answered with an astonished face. "Come on, let's go." He averted his eyes from her and starting walking in large strides.

A few seconds later, Kutori came running after him. "Wait up wait up! You're going too fast!"

"I completely forgot, but we're about to miss the airship to the 53rd Island."

"... seriously!?"

The 68th Island is situated near the outer edge of Regul Aire. No public airships go there directly, and in order to ask a ferryman they would first need to get on a closer island. So naturally, Willem had a perfectly logical reason for walking so fast. He definitely wasn't trying to conceal his embarrassment or anything of the sort.

"At this rate we won't make it home today. Come on, hurry hurry."

"Slow down a little this stuff is heavy!"

As a deep scarlet red gradually filled the sky above them, the two walked hurriedly but cheerfully through the streets of town towards the harbor.

What am I , the girl thought to herself.

Her memories were slowly disappearing. Her personality was crumbling. Could she still call her half broken self 'Kutori'?

Already, she had forgotten almost half of the names of her companions in the fairy warehouse. Even if she tried hard to study and relearn their names, her memories of them refused to return.

While in her room.

While in the cafeteria surrounded by the little ones.

While helping Naigrat with chores.

A mysterious feeling of discomfort constantly nagged at her, even though she had finally returned to the everyday life that shaped her into who she was over the years. The thought that she didn't belong here would suddenly well up from somewhere deep inside her without rhyme or reason.

Kutori thought of her own current condition as agonizing. Painful. Miserable. Lonely. But she also wanted to treasure each and every one of those emotions. Because once those feelings left her, Kutori Nota Seniolis would probably be no more once and for all.

Kutori told everyone in the warehouse about the journey to the land that she, Willem, and Nephren were about to embark on.

"Are you going to disappear again?" a green haired girl asked with a lonely looking expression.

A pink haired girl hung her head and gazed blankly at the ground. It seems like she still hasn't recovered from her cold.

"Nothing to think too hard about. It's not like it's goodbye for forever," a purple haired girl said nonchalantly.

"Um… please be careful. Please please be really careful," an orange haired girl said with a worrisome face on the verge of tears.

"We'll have a welcome home party when you get back, okay?" Naigrat said with a slightly forced smile.

"Personally, I'm against this, but…" Aiseia had the face of a mother reluctantly putting up with her child's selfishness.

"Sorry, but I can't sit here and wait."

"Well I guess there's nothing I can do. After all, you are a love monster with only feelings of romance instead of a brain. If you were separated from your lover you would probably wither away and shrivel."

Kutori wanted to say something in return, but she knew Aiseia was right, so she gave up. Avoiding needless argument was the choice of a wise adult. Probably.

"I want to tag along too, but I guess that won't be possible. Won't be able to do much anyways," said Aiseia.

"There's no need to worry so much. I'll bring you a souvenir from the land," Kutori said and gave a thumbs up.

Aiseia never responded.

Kutori decided to leave Seniolis behind. Even if she brought it, it's not like she would be able to wield it anyways. On top of that,

as someone now acting to find happiness for herself, she was no longer qualified to touch that tragedy enthusiast of a sword.

"Goodbye, partner," she said, then stuck her tongue out in a mocking gesture.

She decided those would serve nicely as her final words of parting.

Part 6: Reunion

She knocked on the door, but received no answer.

She twisted the doorknob, and found that it had been left unlocked.

"Kutori…?"

She pushed the door open. The room was dark, and empty.

Ah, that's right . Tiat remembered. The owner of the room had left the fairy warehouse to ride on a big airship and pick up her comrades waiting on the land. She wouldn't be home for at least a few days.

"Um… I came to return the book I borrowed." Cautiously, Tiat stepped foot into the uninhabited room.

She tiptoed quietly through the neatly cleaned room and placed the book she held by her chest on Kutori's desk. As she put it down, she noticed that something had been placed towards the edge of the desk. A big blue stylish hat… and beside it a shining silver object.

"This is…"

Tiat had seen it before. A silver brooch with a clear blue gemstone fit into it. It looked so good on Kutori, and Tiat had always been envious. Once, when she told Kutori that, she answered, "Thanks, but I'm sure it'll look good on you too soon enough. Once you get a little bigger, I'll give it to you as a present."

Tiat panicked a little when she heard that. She didn't mean to make it seem like she wanted Kutori to give her the brooch. She just wanted to say how lovely Kutori looked with such a grown up accessory on her. But still, Kutori's words made her a little happy.

… *I wonder if she forgot it?*

Tiat suddenly felt a bit mischievous. Since her conversation with Kutori, she had grown some. Maybe now was the time that she could become an elegant adult lady with a pretty brooch. It wouldn't do any harm to just try it on. She gulped, then cautiously stretched her hand out towards the glittering object. Her fingertips grazed the silver metal.

"... maybe I shouldn't."

Tiat pulled back her hand. She felt like if she touched it, even just for a moment, even if she was just trying it out, something very important would be lost.

Now, the Plantaginesta is, at its core, a cargo ship. Unlike a messenger ship, it was designed to safely carry a large amount of materials. In other words, passenger comfort was not particularly prioritized.

Willem could really feel the consequences of this as the airship rocked back and forth incessantly. Moreover, mysterious pipes jutted out into the hallways and rooms, the smell of oil had stuck onto seemingly every single object in the entire ship, obscene graffiti could be spotted in various places, empty meat paste cans littered the floors, etc. etc.

Now, Willem could deal with a bad environment. He lived through plenty of that on the 28th Island. But with the addition of an airship's specialty rocking, his discomfort quickly surpassed his tolerance limit.

Estimated flight time: 42 hours.

Those 42 hours were truly hell.

But eventually, they arrived at Ground Level Ruins K96-MAL, the site of the fallen expedition airship Saxifraga.

"The world is shaking…"

While staggering around like a drunk man, Willem set foot on the ashen sand. The soles of his shoes sunk a distance about as thick as a hand down into the soft ground. Just walking took an annoyingly large amount of effort. He didn't even want to imagine what running around and fighting on this sand was like.

Looking up from the ground, Willem saw the vast gray ruins. Within stood a few half crumbled stone buildings which looked like someone had gone and smacked ashen dye all over them.

Long ago, a small town stood in place of those eerie monuments. Situated near the borders of the empire, it was quite far away from the capital. Not large or prosperous by any means, distant from any of the main trade routes, and lacking any distinctive products, the town had quietly accumulated its own little insignificant history over the centuries, and should have continued for many more.

Willem crouched down and grabbed a handful of sand. The ashen dust quickly fell back down through the gaps between his fingers.

"Less dramatic than I expected…"

He felt none of the emotions that he had prepared himself for

beforehand. Sadness, frustration, none of them came to mind. It wasn't that he still hadn't grasped the reality of the situation. Before his eyes was his hometown, Gomag, or rather what had become of it. He had been able to accept that truth so quickly it almost felt strange.

"... are you okay?"

"Yeah, don't worry about me," he answered to Nephren, who must have snuck up beside him sometime while he was lost in thought, then stood up.

"You don't look okay."

"Probably just the motion sickness. Really, there's nothing on my mind in particular."

"If you're really not thinking about anything, I think that's something to worry about. This is your hometown, isn't it?"

A strong wind blew by, causing Nephren's sand protection cloak to flutter wildly in the air.

"I'm fine. My hometown doesn't exist anymore, and right now my home is --" Willem pointed to the sky. "-- up there. Right?"

Nephren grabbed Willem's head with both arms and drew it closer to her face. She stared deep into his eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. Now let go of me, don't want anyone to see."

"It's not like we're doing anything bad."

"That doesn't matter. What matters is what other people think of it."

"Reeeeeee--" Suddenly, he heard the sound of rapid sprinting across the sand. "-- eeeeeen!!"

From out of nowhere, a forceful kick, along with a splatter of sand, landed in his sides. Just like when Collon or Panival attacked him playfully, Willem took it without trying to dodge. However, this time turned out to be very different. The kick, far more powerful than he had imagined, knocked him over, leaving him on the ground writhing in pain. Willem's assailant, a young boy… or no, young girl, grabbed hold of Nephren's shoulders and shook them violently. Willem, still flat on the sand, lifted just his face up to take a look.

"Are you okay!? What did this pervert try to do to you!? He didn't succeed, right!?"

The newcomer had scarlet hair and eyes with a slightly darker shade of the same color. Willem had never seen her before, but her appearance matched with someone that he heard about. Noft Kei Desperatio, user of Dug Weapon Desperatio.

"No, Noft." Nephren, looking slightly uncomfortable, tried to

wiggle out of Noft's hold. "He's not a pervert trying to do things to little girls. In fact, some wish that he would do more to little girls."

"I didn't think you would come to the rescue. You're still fun sized like before!"

Nephren's explanation went in one ear and out the other. Noft, a broad smile on her face, only squeezed Nephren even harder.

"... it's only been a month since you left the warehouse. Of course I haven't grown much since then."

"Really? It feels like it's been so long since I've seen you…" Noft suddenly froze, as if remembering something. "-- Hey… you were at that battle too, weren't you?"

"Hm?"

"The one with the extra large '6th'."

"Ah…" Still locked inside Noft's arms, Nephren gave a small nod. "I went and fought."

"Did Kutori fight bravely?"

Nephren looked a bit confused. "Uh, yeah she was really

brave."

"Ah, well that's good." A lonely smile spread across Noft's face. "I don't know how to put it… I didn't really like her that much, and I thought we would never be able to get along, and that still hasn't changed. But after coming here, being in a situation where I don't know if I'll be able to ever make it home safely, I started to feel a little regret. Even if we never became friends, even if we still fought all the time, I wish I talked with her more."

Willem sluggishly raised his body up from the sand. He spotted two more girls walking over from the airship. One face Willem knew very well, and the other he had never seen before, but it matched the description of one he had heard about. She must have been the other of the two fairies sent down on the expedition: Lantolq Itsuri Historia, user of Dug Weapon Historia. With that, the safety of the two of them was confirmed. Willem breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"It must have been strong, the Beast on the 15th Island," Noft continued. "Not being able to win without Kutori opening the gate, that's not normal. But you being here safe and sound means that she really did it. She went and opened that gate."

"Umm…" A rare occurrence, Nephren's face showed visible signs of being troubled.

"She was always serious when it came to that stuff, saying she needed to protect everyone and all. She always tried to act strong, even though inside she was super scared. I bet she kept up the act until the very end."

Maybe because of her long awaited reunion with a friend from the fairy warehouse, Noft seemed to be letting her mouth run wild. She went on and on, her words gradually becoming less and less comprehensible. Pretty soon she would probably lose track of what was saying herself. Finally, a tap on the shoulder from a blue haired girl, Lantolq, interrupted her.

"Noft."

"What? I'm busy right now." With a sniffle, Noft paused her endless stream of words.

"Take a deep breath."

"Huh?"

"Inhale, exhale. Once you've calmed down, look behind you."

Maybe because she was obedient at heart, or maybe just because it was Lantolq speaking, Noft did as she was told. She took a deep breath in, let it all out, then turned around with a face that said she had no idea why she was doing this--

Noft froze.

“... umm…” A pattern of blue and red fluttered in the wind. Kutori stood there with an uncomfortable look. “... long time no see?”

“G--”

“G?”

“G-Ghost!!” Noft released Nephren from her grip and sprinted off at an extremely impressive speed considering the unstable sand beneath her feet.

“W-Wait!” Kutori took off after her, again at quite a respectable speed. She wasn’t fast enough to catch up to Noft, but she didn’t let her get too far away.

The two girls, overflowing with lively vigor, dashed through the hollow shell of a dead town, on the vast, dead land.

“Who do you think will win?” Nephren asked to Lantolq.

“Let’s see… I bet tonight’s dessert on Noft tripping and Kutori catching her.”

“Then I’ll bet the same on Kutori getting tired out first… it’s been a long time, Lantolq. Glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Same for you. Glad you guys are safe. Really.” Lantolq squeezed Nephren’s small palm with her hand.

While listening to their conversation off to the side, Willem watched the other two girls run off into the distance.

Chapter 4: The Brilliance of This Moment

Part 1: The Suspicious Emnetwyte

During treatment, Willem discovered that Noft was in fact very

ticklish. The whole time, her body squirmed and her legs and arms flailed about violently, making it very hard to perform his task. He eventually got Kutori to help out; if he didn't, who knows how long it would have taken. He also probably would've ended up with more than one bruise next to his eyes.

Lantolq, on the other hand, proved to be troublesome for an entirely different reason. Everytime Willem pressed his fingers into her back, she let out a weirdly suggestive moan. Well, Lantolq did seem very mature for her age, but whenever he heard that voice Willem got the feeling that they were doing something inappropriate and had to pause his work.

As a result, the treatments took much longer than he originally expected. Kutori's sharp glare piercing into the back of Willem's neck the entire time didn't exactly help either.

Earlier, Noft and Lantolq told them that Beast attacks had continued to occur sporadically after the fall of the Saxifraga. None of them turned out to be major threats, and the pair easily handled the intruders. However, upon inspection, Willem found that they both suffered from light Venom poisoning, which then led to the laborious treatments.

Venom acts as a sort of opposite to one's life force. Igniting Venom inevitably leads to disorder in that vital energy, and if one ignites too strong a flame, continues to use it for too long, or uses it repeatedly in rapid succession, the disordered state can persist even long after battle, gradually becoming harder and harder to heal.

The treatment Willem just performed on the two girls is one of the countermeasures to this condition. It involves stimulating the appropriate acupuncture points in order to adjust the blood flow and forcibly relax the stiffened muscles. It was once well known as a practical technique for battlefield medics, way back in the previous world.

"Well, how do you feel? Better?" the exhausted Willem asked.

The two girls exchanged glances.

"My body feels so light… it's kind of creepy."

"If I'm not fatigued after an intense battle it just doesn't feel right."

It seemed like his treatment worked properly, but the answers he received didn't seem too enthusiastic or grateful. Ever since Willem introduced himself yesterday, their attitude towards him have been less than stellar. Well, Willem could understand. To them, Second Technician Willem Kumesh was no more than a suspicious

man who suddenly appeared in front of them and started acting like they were under his control. While he did have identification, and Kutori and Nephren backed him up, Willem hadn't yet spent any time trying to build their trust on a personal level. So he understood why they remained cautious of him… or so he thought. Apparently, there was more to it.

"But… you're an Emnetwyte, aren't you?" Upon his asking, Lantolq readily revealed the reason for their attitude. "If you were just a fraud that would be another story, but Kutori and Nephren have verified the truth. That means you belong to the accursed race which destroyed the earth. Accepting you so easily is the unnatural option here."

Willem could see where she was coming from. Up until now, he had never received that kind of response from people he revealed his identity to, but perhaps that was only due to good luck. When he thought about it, Lantolq's view made sense as a default reaction.

"It's not like I personally did anything…"

"Also, that nonchalant and casual attitude that you try to keep up is suspicious. It's like you're trying to hide your true intentions, or you're used to deceiving women… well, I get that if I keep nitpicking I could go on forever, but…"

"Then don't do it… used to deceiving women? A gross misunderstanding. I demand you take that back."

"I'm thankful that you saved Kutori from her planned death. And from your treatment earlier, it looks like your skills are reliable. You used to be… a Quasi Brave, was it? I do not doubt that you were once a warrior with such a title. You're probably far more specialized for battle than even us, who live and die for that single purpose. But still, that's not enough evidence for me to judge you as a harmless character."

"What the heck else do you need…"

"Do you know how the Emnetwyte released the 17 Beasts upon the world?"

"I heard a little from the Great Sage, about how the Beasts were biological weapons developed by the anti-Empire organization True World and so on."

"Biological weapons."

"Yep, that's what he told me."

"Then that means there must have been an original being the weapon was built out of, right? Do you have any idea what that could have been?"

"No idea. I don't think that's very important. Probably captured

a new species of Monstrous or something."

"I see."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"I see…"

And that's how Willem's conversation with Lantolq went.

"I don't particularly hate you or anything," Noft answered upon his asking. "You don't look too high and mighty or anything, in fact you look kinda plain. Also, if Aiseia and Nephren trust you then I guess you're not thinking any bad thoughts. Actually it looks like you're not thinking any thoughts, but…"

"Can't tell if I just got complimented or insulted…"

"Still, I can't fully trust you. I trust Lan's judgement the most. Sorry, but as long as she doesn't trust you, neither can I."

"I see…"

And thus went Willem's conversation with Noft.

"I don't think you need to worry too much about it." Perhaps because Willem's discouraged mood showed, Nephren walked up to him. "Those two are pretty much always like that. They're not the type to seriously hate someone, so I'm sure their attitude will relax soon enough."

"Yeah… I guess."

They didn't seem like bad kids. Lantolq was just trying to think through things by her own logic, and Noft simply trusted her. Willem had no reason to hold any hostile feelings towards them.

"Thanks, Nephren." His words were met with a puzzled look. "You always back me up. I appreciate it."

"Nn… it's not really that," Nephren answered with her usual hard to read expression. "You looked like you would break if I left you alone."

"... do I look that weak right now?" he asked, slightly hurt. Nephren, however, never responded.

The packing of the excavated goods seemed to be going along smoothly. One by one, wooden boxes filled the airship's hold, which reeked of iron and oil. After receiving permission from the person in charge of the work, Willem opened one of those boxes and pulled out the bundle tightly wrapped in dirty cloth which sat inside.

"Watch out, if you touch it you might catch of them Emnetwyte curses," a kind looking Orc worker warned him.

"Thanks for the concern, but you don't need to worry. I'm an Emnetwyte."

“Hahah, aren’t you a little old to still be playing make believe?” With a hearty laugh, the worker walked off.

“... did he think I was some delusional teenager?”

Well, even if he was telling the truth, to most people the Emnetwyte were the legendary incarnations of evil. If someone suddenly declared that they belonged to such a race, it would only be natural for others to assume he was delusional. Willem needed to be more careful in the future.

Shifting his focus back to the task at hand, Willem held the contents of that bundle -- a large sword composed of dozens of metal fragments -- up to his eyes. There was no doubt: it was the Kaliyon Lapidem Sybilus.

He didn’t have the slightest idea why it had been excavated here in Gomag. Navrutri was from West Garmond, and didn’t think too highly of the empire. Willem couldn’t think of a reason why he would come all the way here, to the borderlands of the empire, after the battle with the Visitors and the Poteau.

“Ah, who cares.”

He probably had something going on, nothing of concern to Willem. Right now, the sword itself was more important. He performed a rough check on the condition of the spell lines. As expected, they had fallen into utter disorder. In this condition, it wouldn’t be of any use, and Willem wasn’t confident that he could restore it with his skills. He needed to disassemble it and take a more detailed look.

“-- What are you doing here?” Noft appeared out from behind a wooden box. “Even if you steal something you’ll end up dealing with the Trading Company anyway, so there’s no point, you know?”

“I’m upset you assumed I was up to such petty mischief.” Willem wagged his finger. “I’m an evil Emnetwyte, after all. If I’m going to plot something, it’s going to be a larger scale crime.”

“For real?”

“For real.” He chuckled.

“Well, what kind of crime is it then? Are you going to sink this whole ship?”

“No, then I’d die too.”

“Wouldn’t it be cool if you faithfully carried out evil deeds without a second thought to your own well being?”

“How foolish. Real villains don’t need such cliche pride. We respect ourselves and the nature of things. Basics of being evil, really.”

“For real?”

“For real.” Another laugh. “Oh, that reminds me. I’m going to do maintenance on this guy, so while I’m at it I might as well do you guys’ swords too.”

After borrowing Noft and Lantolq’s swords, Willem found a nice empty storage room. The walls, which looked like haphazard mosaics of steel, copper, and tin plates, were covered with not so elegant graffiti. The pipes running across the ceiling all had small cracks here and there. The iron grill covering the ventilation duct only had one screw left to fasten it on; just a little shake would probably bring it down. Various tools, probably brought on board when the work necessary to allow the ship to cross the barrier surrounding Regul Aire was performed, had been left scattered to the sides of the room. As soon as Willem set foot inside it, a terrible stench of unknown origin assaulted his nose. Needless to say, it wasn’t a very pleasant place to be. But, it provided protection from the winds and sands, and, most importantly, it was quiet.

“Well, I guess I’m in no position to complain.” Willem set down the two swords he had been carrying on his back against the wall. He then picked up one of them and sat down. “Start maintenance.”

The blade gradually broke apart as Venom poured into it. Roughly half of the 38 metal fragments floated apart on their own and settled down once finding their spot. Unlike the time upon that hill when he fixed Seniolis, it would be hard to completely disassemble it at once due to the space restrictions of the room. He could perform a more thorough examination once he got back to the warehouse; right now a simple check and touch up would suffice. Fortunately, no one seemed to be around, so he could probably get it done pretty fast if he got into his groove--

“Ah, here you are.” Kutori suddenly appeared in the doorway. She wore unfashionable work clothes and had her hair tied up behind her so it wouldn’t get in the way.

Ever since they got on the airship, Kutori had been going all around and helping out with various tasks. After all, she was brought aboard only as the assistant of the 2nd Enchanted Weapons Technician. Without any actual duties, the only way she could find some way to make herself useful was to actively ask around for work.

“Stop disappearing. I’m your secretary, so I at least need to know where you are, right?”

“Ah… um…” Willem, surprised at the unexpected visit,

paused his work. “I mean, secretary is just the title we used to get you here, so it’s not like you actually have to work or anything.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you.”

Willem had absolutely no comeback. But why did she want to work so badly?

“Besides, if I don’t do anything, you really will be ‘that guy who abused his authority and brought his useless lover with him to the battlefield’. I don’t want that to happen.”

“That’s not something for you to worry about.”

“Well I do worry about it.” Kutori puffed her cheeks out, like a child throwing a fit. “Hey, can I watch?”

“I don’t mind, but it really stinks here, you know?”

“That’s okay. There are rooms way worse than this one elsewhere on the ship.”

If Willem were in Kutori’s position, he definitely wouldn’t call this stench ‘okay’, but if she was fine with it there was no need to argue. He gestured for her to come in.

“Is that Noft’s sword?”

“Yep.”

Willem lightly tapped one of the metal fragments, the Talismans, with his fingertip. It glided smoothly through the air until it reached its proper place, where it stopped and emitted a clear ringing noise, like that of a metallophone. Meanwhile, Kutori took a seat on a nearby toolbox.

“It sure is pretty, but in this room it doesn’t feel as romantic.”

“Better than doing it in the middle of a sandstorm.”

“True.”

A question suddenly popped into Willem’s head. “Do you still remember that night I did maintenance on Seniolis?”

“Yeah, I remember.” Kutori nodded. “Maybe it’s because I’m being careful to not ignite any Venom, but recently I don’t really feel like any more memories are fading away. It could just be that I’m not noticing, but I feel pretty good right now. Nephren, Noft, Lantolq, Aiseia… I still remember all of them. Maybe my memories have lost some of the detail, but…”

“I see.” Willem noticed that his own name didn’t appear in that list, but there was no need to ask about that. He hadn’t been forgotten. If that were the case, Kutori wouldn’t be on this ship with him.

As the Talismans played their sloppy song, the two sat in silence for a brief moment.

“... hm?” Willem noticed something strange.

“What’s wrong?” Kutori asked.

“It’s not broken.”

“Of course it’s not. If it were broken, Noft would have been in big trouble.”

“That’s not what I meant… how do I put this…” He needed a couple seconds to think through how to explain it. “Kaliyons have a thing called a ‘slayer level’ which indicates their ability. It determines what kind of enemy the sword is especially effective against.”

“O-Okay.” Kutori looked a bit startled at the sudden rush of technical terms, but she seemed to be following along well enough.

“As the sword kills more of the same type of enemy, it starts to adapt, or acquire a specialty. You might have heard of a ‘Dragon Slayer’. That’s what people called a sword whose slayer level had an extremely high affinity for Dragons.”

“A-Ah…”

To Kutori, who had never fought anyone except the Beasts, it might’ve been a bit hard to understand. On top of that, she had never even seen an actual Dragon. For the time being, Willem moved along.

“This sword is a ‘Kinslayer’.”

“... um?”

“It’s specialized to kill the user’s own kind, its kin. It exists for the sole purpose of one human killing another. It doesn’t seem very useful for anything else.”

“Uh, isn’t that a bit weird? Noft fights the Beasts with that sword.”

“Exactly, it’s weird. That’s why I thought something related to the specialization mechanism must be broken, but…”

As far as Willem could tell, the sword, Desperatio, suffered from overall wear and tear, causing its functional efficiency to drop, but the functions themselves were still intact. Willem found it hard to believe that over five hundred years had passed since its last maintenance. The backbone circuit was in good shape, and the spell lines hadn’t deteriorated that much.

“Anyways, today was just emergency repair. We can leave the mystery solving for another day.”

Then that means there must have been an original being the weapon was built out of, right? Do you have any idea what that could have been? Willem remembered the conversation he had with Lantolq earlier.

“... what is it this time?” Kutori asked suspiciously.

“Nothing.” Willem shook his head.

Now, he had an idea. A very unpleasant one. It sat right in the middle of his brain and refused to move. He was just overthinking things. Or at least, he tried to convince himself that he was just overthinking things.

It was true that if he accepted that idea, it would solve many mysteries at once. Why the 17 Beasts were able to destroy the world at such a terrifying speed. According to the history books, in just a few days, two countries disappeared from the map. By the next week, five countries, four islands, and two oceans ceased to exist. After another week, a map no longer held any meaning.

"....."

No. It couldn't be true. If it were, there's no way that the Great Sage Suwon wouldn't have realized by now. And if he had known, there's no way that he wouldn't have told Willem--

If you cannot accept it, then maybe you should tell him everything. If you reveal one or two of the truths about the land you've been hiding, I suspect his attitude will change.

He remembered those words Ebon Candle spoke to Suwon. That's right. The one who silenced Suwon, the one who didn't let him speak any further, was none other than Willem himself. By insisting that they needed to focus on what they had right now and that they couldn't afford to care about things already lost, he rejected Suwon. Looking back, maybe his attitude back in that conversation wasn't correct. But he didn't regret it.

What I have right now…

"Come on, what is it?" Kutori asked for the third time.

Without a single word, Willem stood up, walked over to Kutori, and embraced her tightly.

"... what's wrong?" Kutori wrapped her arms around him and gently patted his back.

"You're not surprised?"

"I'm very surprised."

"You're not going to panic?"

"I am panicking. My heart is going wild right now. I don't know what happened, but you're finally showing me your weak side, even though you always try to act strong. My feelings of happiness and wanting to cheer you up win out over panic."

"... Kutori…"

"Right now, you look like you would disappear if I left you alone, you know? This is really embarrassing, but of course I can't push you away."

Willem put more strength into his arms.

“Ah! Hey, that hurts…”

“You’re a good girl.”

“... sorry I couldn’t hear that very well. Can you say it again? Preferably in a louder voice.”

“Nothing.”

“Hey! Say it again! Just one more time!”

“Marry me.”

“One mo -- wait, what?”

Now Kutori was really starting to panic. Willem hugged her even harder.

This one’s will is strong. It seems that unmoving will is the essence of this man. He can only have one goal at a time, and he sees no value in anything not directly related to his current goal. That’s why he will not bend. He will not stop. He will keep pushing himself to his limits.

He finally found it. By meeting Kutori and being in the fairy warehouse, he, the one who couldn’t protect anything he fought to protect, the one who couldn’t return home to the place he so desperately longed for, the shell of a former hero, finally found a new way of life.

He found new things he wanted to protect.

He found a new place he longed to return home to.

He finally felt that it was okay for him to keep on living. And that’s why...

I wanted to make Kutori happy .

Willem remembered uttering those words to Naigrat one dreary night in the warehouse. *No,* he thought. *Not wanted. I want to make Kutori happy. I want to cling onto that wish. I want to forget the past. I only want to think about here and now and what’s to come.*

“Unnhhh…”

Noticing that Kutori didn’t seem to be struggling to squirm out of his arms anymore, Willem checked to see how she was doing. Whether she had become unable to breath, or whether the crushing force provided by his arms had surpassed her limit, or perhaps due to a combination of both, he couldn’t tell, but for some reason or another Kutori seemed to have fainted.

Part 2: Icicle Coffin

That was probably a dream , Kutori thought as soon as she woke up. That seemed like the only possible explanation. A

proposal? Even if the world was turned upside down, those words would never come out of Willem's mouth. It just seemed too unrealistic.

But upon asking Noft and Lantolq about yesterday, she received answers like 'I let him borrow our swords since he asked' and 'he came back in such a good mood it was creepy', which only further blurred the distinction between reality and dream. What in the world actually happened?

"Did something happen with that Emnetwyte?" Lantolq asked.

"N-N-N-N-Nothing don't worry about it," Kutori answered in a most natural voice. Of course, she couldn't just say 'I think I was proposed to but I'm not sure if it was a dream or not'. Doing so would only get her explosive laughter from Noft and a cold stare from Lantolq.

Asking Willem directly seemed to be the only viable option. *Hey, you. Did you propose to me yesterday?* On second thought, maybe not. Definitely not. After all, her memory had been acting funky recently, so it was probably safe to assume that it was just a dream.

"What do you think happiness is?" Instead, Kutori tried asking Lantolq the question that had suddenly popped into her mind.

"Quite the philosophical question. Are you planning on starting a religion or something?"

"No, I'm just thinking about something personal."

"I see." Lantolq closed the book she had been reading and put on her thinking face. "Well to start with, happiness means different things to different people. Some people are happy as long as they have enough food. Some are happy if they have books. Some people need to always be living life to the fullest. Some people only get that feeling of satisfaction when they overcome some barrier. Some people are happy as long as others around them are happy, and, inconveniently, some are the exact opposite. "

"... that's true."

All sorts of people exist. All sorts of hearts and minds. All sorts of desires. That means happiness can take an unlimited number of forms. It seemed obvious now that Kutori thought about it.

"But almost all of those people don't know it themselves. They don't know what form their own happiness takes. Yet still they all claim they want to be happy, without knowing what exactly that means."

"Ah…"

"Even if they realize that they want to be happy, they are

unable to actually become happy. The important thing is to not avert your eyes from your own heart. Does that answer your question?"

"Yeah." To be honest, Kutori hadn't really been expecting such a detailed answer and was kinda weirded out, but of course she couldn't mention that. "Thanks."

Kutori headed to the cafeteria to grab some breakfast. At Willem's request, the fairies were now able to use the cafeteria that all the other crew members used. Kutori invited Lantolq to come with, but she refused on the grounds that she wasn't comfortable in places where there were a lot of strangers. Kutori wasn't in the mood to forcibly drag her along, so she ended up going by herself.

What does happiness mean to me? Kutori asked herself again, having gained new insights from Lantolq. She imagined placing a slice of sweetly boiled lemon on some bread and chowing down. The stimulating mixture of sweet and sour spreading throughout her mouth… pure happiness. It sure seemed like happiness, but that probably wasn't what she was looking for.

Not having any ambitions, or perhaps trying to not have any ambitions, was fairly common for the fairies. After all, they simply didn't have the time. To someone who doesn't even know whether or not they will be alive tomorrow, having dreams about the far off future can only bring sadness. Now, even though Kutori was no longer an actual fairy, the same principle still applied to her.

But Willem refused to accept such resignation. Even if someone had an uncertain tomorrow, he would tell them to hold their head high and take off running towards the day after tomorrow. Perhaps it was even a bit cruel, but Kutori liked that part of Willem. She couldn't run away now.

Medicine with thorns poking out of it. A gecko with round eyes. Baked goods soaked with water.

Random images flooded her mind. Although it had slowed down recently, the encroachment seemed to still be moving along smoothly. Perhaps she should have been more depressed at being reminded again that she had no future, but Kutori had already grown used to it. Waving her hand back and forth to swat away the nuisances in her mind, she took back her train of thought.

Maybe marriage was the key after all. A book she read before said that marriage is synonymous with a woman's happiness. Since she didn't know a single married woman, Kutori was never really convinced of that statement, but maybe it was worth considering. She remembered that weird plan Naigrat told her about the other

day. Her plan to trap Willem in the fairy warehouse forever by giving him a family or something like that.

Kutori entered delusion mode. The setting was the fairy warehouse, ten years in the future. Willem had aged a bit… she couldn't really imagine that… maybe some facial hair would do the trick. Beside him, a now grown up and very adult looking Kutori. Between them stood children of questionable race. Two boys and one girl. One of the boys shared a lot of Kutori's features, while the other two kids took after Willem. All three were full of energy. If she looked away even for one second, they would run off and roll around and get themselves covered in mud. Then Kutori would chase them around, catch them, and stuff them in the bathtub while Willem casually baked a cake, saying something like 'energy is the best medicine for kids'.

Kutori's memory wasn't the greatest, but she felt like that situation hardly differed from the current one. She shut off the delusion. That wasn't what she was looking for either. It did seem like a happy life, but not necessarily any happier than the present.

A red haired child rolling around on the ground laughing .

Shut up, previous life! Kutori yelled mentally. *I don't have time to be dealing with you right now.*

"Why are you making funny faces at that piece of bread?" Apparently, Nephren had been sitting right beside her since who knows when. "You've been acting kinda creepy for the past few minutes." The bread got stuck in Kutori's throat. Milk. Where's the milk? "Did Willem say something to you?" The milk went down the wrong way. "... I take that as a yes."

After a good fit of choking, Kutori finally calmed down a bit. "W-What makes you think that?"

"Anyone would be able to tell just by looking at you." Nephren's response left no room for a comeback. "But that's why I'm worried," she continued as she broke off a piece of bread.

"About what?"

"Lately, you and Willem look like lost cats."

… *huh?*

"It looks like you don't want to talk about it, so I won't ask for the details, but something's happened since your hair started changing color, am I right?"

"Hm… I guess."

"If you ever feel like talking about it, don't hesitate to come to me. I may not be able to do much, but I can at least stay by your side."

With that, Nephren stopped talking. “Ah… thanks.” First Aiseia, now Nephren. Kutori really did have amazing friends. Forgetting her situation for a moment, she was overcome with a happy feeling.

That was probably a dream , Willem thought as soon as he woke up. That seemed like the only possible explanation. A proposal? Even if the world was turned upside down, those words would never come out of his own mouth. It just seemed too unrealistic.

“... or maybe not.”

Let’s face reality , Willem told himself. Back there in that smelly room, he embraced Kutori and said those ridiculous words. He knew the reason too. In that moment, he thought that he never wanted to let her go. Well, not exactly that. More like he would never let her go. No, not that either. He wanted to bring her happiness forever.

… let’s stop here. The more Willem thought about it, the weirder the direction his thoughts started to wander off in.

There was something more urgent at hand. The kinslayer Desperatio. The original beings which served as the basis for the 17 Beasts. Putting the two together, the answer was simple. And most likely, even though she may not have known the details about Desperatio, Lantolq had arrived at the same conclusion, which may also be one of the reasons why she was so cold to him, an Emnetwyte.

Basically, the Emnetwyte were modified by some method to produce the 17 Beasts. Or at least, that seemed to be the logical hypothesis. Willem didn’t want to think about it much more. If it were true, the saying that the Emnetwyte destroyed all on the land would take on a whole new meaning. They didn’t just create the things which destroyed the earth, as is the common belief, but they literally were the things which destroyed the earth. And moreover, they still haunted the world as symbols of destruction.

“No, it can’t be…”

Willem could see one big flaw in the theory: there was no explanation for the ridiculously fast reproductive speed commonly attributed to the Beasts. Needless to say, transforming a living being into a completely different living being takes a considerable amount of time and effort, even with exceptional skills and techniques. Even the legendary Vampiric took at least three days to convert sacrifices into one of their own with their ‘Soul Contagion’ ability. The 17 Beasts apparently destroyed a few countries just days after their initial appearance. It didn’t seem feasible.

“Maybe I’m just thinking too much into it,” Willem concluded

with a nod.

And with that, he now had one less thing to worry about. What else was left… oh right, his proposal to Kutori.

"....."

Willem got the feeling that he wouldn't be able to look her in the eyes properly for a while.

"I angered the expedition advisor," the First Technician said with a sad face like that of a child who got scolded for a naughty prank.

"Oh, is that so?" Willem responded, not understanding what in the world he was talking about. "Did we bring along an advisor? I don't recall ever seeing him."

"Not us, he was hired by the Company to tag along on the original expedition. He's a civilian salvager. He has a lot of experience, so I really wanted to respect his opinion, but…"

"What happened?"

"So you've heard that we've leaving in five days, right?"

"Yeah."

Willem, who didn't particularly see any appeal in the 'romance' of the land, had no reason to want to stay any longer than necessary. He would have loved to immediately take off, but of course things were not so simple. They still needed to check the health conditions of all the expedition members, finish storing all the excavated goods into the hold, and recover any materials of use from the Saxifraga which they would be leaving behind. There was still quite a lot to do.

"Due to budget constraints and such, we can't extend our stay any longer than that. However, if we go home with just the relics we have now, we'll end up with a slight deficit."

"I see."

"So I decided to send a large scale excavation team underground tomorrow," the Gremian said as he held up his purple finger, looking quite proud of his genius plan. "I want the army to handle the goods, so most of the members are from our side. I'll have the Company guys finish up any other work that needs to be done up here. You -- I don't mind if you come, but what do you want to do?"

"I think I'll pass. So that's how you made that advisor angry."

Of course an advisor sent by the Company wouldn't be too fond of a plan in which only the army benefitted.

"No, that's not quite it." With his purple fingers, the First Technician scratched his bald head. "He said to not go underground

with a large group all at once. That it goes against their theories or whatever."

"... I wonder why."

"Beats me. I asked him why, but he didn't tell me. I bet it's just a superstition. Not everyone thinks through things as logically as we do. There are always going to be sad people who blindly follow illogical customs because of their narrow world views."

"Ah, so I assume you gave that spiel to the advisor as well? How rash of you, First Technician."

"That's right." The rash First Technician drooped his shoulders. "I don't believe I said anything wrong. It's not like I necessarily wanted to deny his experience and beliefs. Can I ask you to set things right with him?"

"I don't mind." *What a pain* , Willem thought. "For every thing that one person sees as correct, there will always be someone else who sees it as grossly incorrect. Please keep that in mind."

"... understood." The Gremian nodded with a bitter face.

Upon asking various workers walking through the corridors, Willem heard that this advisor fellow had been seen going to the storage room for underground expedition equipment. The equipment storage rooms were located towards the bottom of the ship, and the whole area around there was a complete mess. Willem dreaded going there again. However, he couldn't just abandon his task. He lifted open a heavy trapdoor, climbed down a rusty ladder, passed through a room with all sorts of metal parts of unknown origin scattered about, and headed towards the lower layers of the airship.

According to the First Technician, this advisor was a fairly experienced civilian salvager hired by the Trading Company. Willem tried picturing what this character might look like, but every time the image just ended up being Grick or one of his companions. After all, they were an extremely experienced and skillful group, having managed to dig up one of the extinct Emnetwyte and even revive him.

"Is the expedition advisor here?"

As Willem arrived at the equipment storage room, he pushed open the semi-airtight door and looked around, only to find Grick standing there, wrapped in a bunch of clunky gear.

"... oh?"

"... huh?"

The two men stared at each other for a moment, with a sort of awkward, hard to describe atmosphere between them.

"The theory we follow is based on years of experience," Grick

complained, not even trying to hide his upset mood. “Well, I admit that sometimes it’s easy for superstition to get mixed in. There are some theories that seem really questionable to me, like ‘if you hear the noise of water underground, immediately droop your ears’. I mean, I’m not an Ayrantrobos. What am I even supposed to do?”

Well, it’s better than being told to curl up your tail , Willem thought. “So if that belief is based on experience, does that mean you’ve never seen a large group go underground and return safely?”

“It’s not an absolute rule. But above around seven people, the rate of survival clearly decreases. That’s why civilian salvagers rarely work in large groups.”

“I see. I understand why you were pissed off now,” Willem said with a nod. He forgot to ask the First Technician exactly how many people he planned on sending down, but it most likely wasn’t any lower than seven. “By the way, what is this?”

“A dust protection cloak, scarf, and goggles.”

“And why are you handing them to me?”

“There’s a pretty nasty sandstorm today. Going outside without proper gear is a bit dangerous.”

“And why are you assuming I’m going outside today?”

“Today is our only chance to go underground,” Grick responded. “There’s something I want to show you. We can’t bring it up to the surface though, so we’ll have to go all the way down to it.”

“And why do I have to go along on this bothersome expedition?”

“Come on, I never would have thought I’d run into you here. It’s fate. Good luck bestowed upon us by the Visitors. Wouldn’t want it to go to waste.”

Willem didn’t understand Grick’s logic.

“-- Ah, perfect. Would you like to come along too, young lady?” Grick called out to someone behind Willem.

Figuring that Noft or someone was there, Willem turned around, only to discover Kutori, her back turned towards them, in the middle of trying to sneak out. She slowly turned around with a panicked look on her face.

Uh oh. Willem, also remembering the events of the previous night, averted his gaze, trying to not let anything show on his face.

“If you’re his secretary, supporting him is part of your job, right?” Grick said, completely oblivious to the tension between Willem and Kutori. “Three people is just the right size for going underground. We’ll have less blind spots, and if one of us messes up the other two can cover. We can also put additional backup on

standby above ground."

As Grick rambled on cheerfully, he grabbed another set of dust protection gear.

Sometime in the past five hundred years, a large movement of the earth's crust must have occurred. The underground structure discovered by the expedition team looked almost completely ruined. Numerous walls and ceilings had collapsed, clogging up old corridors and opening up new ones. Due to cracks in the external walls, tons of sand and water had found their way in, making the paths even harder to traverse.

With only a small crystal lamp illuminating their way, the group descended into the ruins. Grick led them through the chaotic mess of corridors with ease, demonstrating his years of salvaging experience.

Every exhalation of breath produced a misty white cloud. The air around them seemed to chill their very bones, as if they were walking through a giant block of ice. Every time they went down another level, the temperature dropped even further. By the fourth floor, the puddles of water on the ground became patches of solid ice. Having to constantly try to avoid slipping only made matters worse.

"As you've seen, pretty much everything up on the surface has weathered away over the years, so it's not the best for treasure hunting. On the other hand, most things down here have been preserved in their original form. The real salvaging starts when we get down here," Grick explained.

"At least four floors, with each one being this large, huh? Hard to believe such a labyrinth was sitting right under my hometown," Willem said. He wondered whether it was built while he still lived in the orphanage or after he left for his final battle. Well, there was no way to find out now, so maybe it was a pointless question. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Willem turned around to check on Kutori, but she didn't seem to be having any trouble with the darkness or the difficult footing. Not much of a surprise, considering that she was one of the few to ever be recognized by Seniolis.

"By the way, Willem. Those young ladies…" Grick began.

"Hm?"

"They're all good kids, just like you told me."

"Ah." Willem figured Grick was talking about Noft and Lantolq. Willem himself still didn't know them very well, but Grick had been

with them on the expedition for a while now. So if he said so, Willem had no reason to doubt him. “You can’t have either of them.”

“How the heck did you jump to that?” Grick chuckled.

“If you want either of them, you’ll have to get through me first.”

“I told you, that’s not what I was talking about. Also don’t look so serious all of a sudden it’s scaring me.”

“What are you guys talking about…” Kutori laughed softly, then sighed, leaving behind a short-lived small white cloud in the chilly underground room.

“Hold up, our path is blocked,” Grick said.

In his very narrow field of view dimly lit by the lone crystal lamp, Willem saw Grick’s figure stop moving. Upon squinting his eyes and peering at the road ahead of them, Willem spotted a mountain made of variously sized rubble chunks. If they tried to smash through it by brute force, they might just end up collapsing the ceiling on themselves.

“Well this is unfortunate. I’d hate to come all this way only to turn back,” Grick said.

“Up until now there seemed to be plenty of side paths. Is there no way around?”

“The paths are so jumbled it’ll take too long to check all of them one by one. On top of that, there’s a Teimerre nest closeby, so I don’t want to walk around too much and wake it up.”

“I see…” Willem thought for a second. “What kind of nest did you say?”

“A Teimerre nest,” Grick answered casually. “They get together in groups of ten or twenty and make nests underground. They usually just sleep while they’re in their nests, but very rarely one will wake up and attack if it senses passersby.”

The Teimerre. The only Beast capable of floating through the air and assaulting Regul Aire. The very reason for the disposable fairy soldiers’ existence. *Would it be possible to wipe them all out right now?* Willem almost asked that aloud, but shut his mouth before anything came out. If such a simple plan could have any effect, the Winged Guard wouldn’t have been using Kaliyons all these years.

Should Nephren and the others perform a surprise attack on the nest now while we have the chance? No, that was also out of the question. Fighting underground would mean completely abandoning one of the fairies’ most important advantages: wings. Furthermore, dozens of Teimerre with the ability to split and reproduce would quickly massively outnumber the fairies. With all

that in mind, a surprise attack would hardly give them the upper hand at all. The only advantage on their side that Willem could think of was that the closed off space along with the Beasts all being concentrated in one place would make a self detonation extremely effective. He didn't want to think about that, though.

"Um, excuse me?" Kutori's voice pulled Willem back to reality from his thoughts. "I can't really explain my reasoning… but can we try going down this path?"

Since none of them wanted to just turn around after having come so far, they decided to follow Kutori's suggestion. As they walked along the never ending, winding path, they often encountered forks in the road. However, each time, Kutori stood still for a moment, made a gesture as if listening intently to something, then chose a path without hesitation.

"I feel like someone is calling me," she explained.

Willem remained skeptical of navigating through a complex labyrinth with such an unreliable compass, but, seeing as they had nothing better to guide them, there was no reason to stop Kutori. Eventually, Willem lost track of time. They seemed to trudge on forever and ever until suddenly, they arrived at a large, spacious room.

"... seriously?" Grick murmured in amazement. "We're here. This is what I wanted to show you."

"Huh?" Willem took a look around. "There's nothing here. What did you want to show me?"

"In front of you," Grick said.

Willem looked ahead once more, but there was nothing more than a wall. No, wait -- upon closer inspection, he realized that it was not a wall but a colossal chunk of ice.

"At first almost this whole room was just ice, but we shaved it all the way back to here after some hard work." Grick lightly tapped the ice with his finger.

Something was inside. As Grick lifted the crystal lamp up, Willem could see it more clearly. Through the unnaturally transparent ice, he spotted vivid scarlet. Willem gulped hard.

"... this…"

"Surprised, right? I was too when I discovered it. Never would have thought I'd discover such a treasure two times in my short life."

Inside the ice was a young child, even younger than the little ones at the fairy warehouse. Her long red hair looked as if it had been fluttering lightly in the wind before being frozen in time. Willem

couldn't make out the fine details of her face, but she seemed to have a peaceful expression. And then, at her chest, gaped a large sword wound. Ignoring that, she looked alive, almost as if she were simply sleeping peacefully. But the body before their eyes was unmistakably a corpse.

"It's not an acquaintance of yours from back then… is it?" Grick asked cautiously.

"Ah…" Willem checked the child's face once more. "No, I didn't know her. I think."

"Gotcha. Her condition's pretty similar to yours when we found ya, so I thought maybe that meant something."

Grick had been in the exact same situation once before. When Willem was a chunk of frozen stone sitting at the bottom of a lake, Grick and his salvager companions got him out and revived him.

"Do you think we can save this one, like you saved me?"

Grick shook his head. "We were able to save you because you were just turned to stone by a curse and not actually dead yet. No matter how you think about it, this kid's clearly long gone."

Fair enough. No human would survive having their heart sliced in two.

"Hold on a second." Willem ignited a small bit of Venom and turned on his spell vision. "Ah, as I thought."

"Hm?"

"There's some kind of curse on that wound." Enduring the throbbing pain in his head, Willem looked closer. He clearly saw a strong curse carved deeply into that tiny body.

"For real?"

"For real. But even if we lift it I don't think she'll come back to life anyways."

Curse were sometimes cast onto a corpse. They could reanimate the corpse to serve the caster, make the corpse spit out information, or spread the curse to blood relatives of the victim. But of course, lifting such a curse only turned the cursed corpse into an uncursed corpse, not into a living person.

"... hm?"

The curse seemed familiar. Willem strained his eyes to get an ever closer look. It looked like an orthodox alteration curse -- the type that could turn a person into a frog or a meal into a stone or stuff like that. The way the spell veins twisted and intertwined gave him that impression. However, he still couldn't recall where he had seen the curse before. His throbbing headache was also beginning

to impede his thinking. Willem deactivated his spell vision.

"I was thinking we could bury her in a more suitable place… but if the body's cursed I guess dispelling it comes first," Grick said.

"Not gonna sell it to a collector or something?"

"That just seems kinda wrong. She looks so peaceful sleeping there, so wouldn't want to interrupt that, right? It's the humane thing to do."

When Grick used the word 'humane', it was strangely persuasive. Willem looked at the girl once more. "Well either way, we have to get her out of this ice first. This kind of curse preserves the body's condition, so even if we take it out of the ice it shouldn't rot or anything."

Suddenly, a cold shiver ran up Willem's spine.

"Hm?"

Only a moment later, an inexplicable sense of dread welled up from the depths of his stomach. He searched around wildly for the cause. He found it soon enough: Kutori stood frozen still with a look of terror on her face, gazing intently at the girl within the ice. And moreover, Willem could sense raging Venom flowing out from her body.

"Wha--"

As he stared in shock at Kutori, the remaining blue in her hair rapidly transformed into the exact same vivid scarlet that they saw in the ice. Kutori Nota Seniolis was disappearing before Willem's eyes.

"Kutori!? What are you doing!?!"

He grabbed Kutori's shoulders and shook her violently. He slapped her on the cheek again and again. But her Venom refused to calm down. Her gaze seemed empty. Whether or not she still had consciousness was uncertain. If Willem didn't act now, it would be too late. He shaped his hand into a wedge and drove it through Kutori's chest, right next to her heart. Her expression immediately twisted in agony. Willem's strike had disordered her blood flow, crushed her lungs, and scattered the blazing Venom. Her vague consciousness was forced to return to normal.

"Sorry, I'll explain later! We need to get back to the surface!"

"Ahh, right right." Grick, utterly bewildered but smart enough to infer what was going on, nodded hurriedly and started leading the way back up.

Part 3: The Worn Out Anachronistic Clock

The next day.

Just as he proclaimed, the First Technician formed a large group of thirteen soldiers and headed underground. Those staying behind were now forced to continue the grueling work of preparing the airship for departure with thirteen less pairs of arms.

The party returned before dusk. The First Technician, bloated with pride, showed off the absence of wounds on each of his thirteen soldiers. Perhaps his team had been exceptionally skilled, for they brought back a fair amount of spoils too.

Now, let's talk a little about the Teimerre. Fundamentally shapeless creatures, they mature rapidly and have the ability to split themselves. They're also the only Beast you'll ever encounter up in the sky, albeit at a very low frequency.

When down on land, they create nests underground. Once they find a cave with suitable space and humidity, they stick onto the walls and ceiling and begin to multiply. Contrary to the repulsive and frightening appearance of these nests, they actually aren't so dangerous. There have been more than just a few cases of a salvager stumbling right into the middle of a '6th' nest and making it out without a scratch. The Teimerre don't seem to bother responding to only one or two invaders, as if too lazy to wake up from their comfortable naps.

It is not clearly known what drives them to action. Some even say that there is no such thing, that the Beasts simply rain destruction on all without thought or reason. Accepting that hypothesis, it doesn't seem like much use to try to figure out what wakes them up or what keeps them asleep.

-- In reality, however, that belief is incorrect. There are a few conditions which, while not necessarily absolute, tend to rouse the Teimerre from their sleep. For example, if a large group of living beings comes close. When one or more of such conditions is fulfilled, a few of the Teimerre will awaken and seek out their prey.

On the surface of the sand, battered continuously by the harsh winds, a small hole opened up.

And then another.

And another.

Then another and another and another and another and another, as if they were bubbles on the surface of boiling water.

Then, a liquid substance began seeping out from each of the newly formed holes.

In the ancient language of the Emnetwyte, 'Teimerre' means something like 'fear'. The kind of fear that pops up out of nowhere, multiplies endlessly while still unnoticed, then devours your heart,

crushes your soul, and swallows everything. That kind of fear.

There is now no way to know how this one species of the 17 Beasts came to acquire such a name. Perhaps the ancient scholars simply went with the first thing that came to their minds. But no matter how it came to be, the beasts known as the Teimerre truly live up to their name.

Myriad Teimerre began crawling out onto the sandy surface of the earth.

On the wall of the Plantaginesta's hold sat a worn out anachronistic clock. Two wire thin and slightly bent hands rotated around in the wooden frame, which had grown deformed due to moisture over the years. According to the crew member who had been aboard this ship the longest, the clock was already dilapidated when he first saw it.

Apparently, the very first captain of the Plantaginesta brought it on board as a memento of his grandmother. And also, it is said that there's a real tearjerker behind the history of the clock, but no one had ever actually heard the story. Someone probably just made up the rumor for entertainment. The worn out clock was no more than a worn out clock. It conveniently showed you the time if you looked up at it, nothing more and nothing less.

At that moment, the hands of the clock pointed to 6:26 p.m.

The first victim was a young Ayrantrobos man who unfortunately had been assigned to window cleaning duty at the time. He had been struggling to clean up the copious amount of sand stuck to the window frame when it happened. He didn't even have enough time to scream.

At that moment, the hands of the clock pointed to 6:28 p.m.

As he walked down the corridors of the ship, the slightly drunk Reptrace Third Officer noticed a strange thumping sound coming from the window. When he went to take a look, he saw a dark green *something* stuck onto it from the outside. And apparently, that green something was trying to smash down the window -- no, more like the very wall of the ship.

The Third Officer screamed.

A large crack appeared in the window.

At that moment, the hands of the clock pointed to 6:32 p.m.

With an explosive boom, the airship's spell incinerator whirled to life. The crew realized that they needed to lift off from the surface as quickly as possible. Every second mattered. If they were too late, they would all be consumed by the horde of ashen sand.

"W-What the hell is that!?" the First Technician yelled.

Grick glanced outside the window. Beyond the surging winds of sand, he could see countless silhouettes shaped like trees spreading out their branches, trying to latch onto the Plantaginesta.

“What do you mean what is that? It’s a group of Teimerre of course,” Grick responded nonchalantly as he stuffed ammunition into a gun. Of course, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to actually kill a Beast with that, but he could at least make them falter. Besides, it would be better than going empty handed.

“A-Are we going to be okay running the spell incinerator like this? I heard that’s what caused the Saxifraga to fall.”

The First Technician was not mistaken, but the Saxifraga had been attacked by the ‘4th’, which seek their prey by sensing sound and movement. The roaring spell incinerator had the effect of basically screaming ‘hey we’re over here!’ at the enemy.

However, the Teimerre are different. Whether their eyes are good or their ears are good no one knows, but they are somehow able to pinpoint the location of any living being and attack. Holding your breath or playing dead or hiding in the shadows won’t do you any good. As long as you’re near them and alive, there’s no way to escape their vicious fangs. This means that no matter how much of a ruckus the spell incinerator caused, it wouldn’t draw even the slightest bit of attention from the Teimerre. Grick wasn’t exactly in the mood to explain all that to the First Technician, and, well, there wouldn’t be much point in doing so anyway.

“Where are the Dug Weapons? It’s for times like these that we brought them, right!? Hurry up and make them clean this mess up!” the First Technician screamed.

“Don’t try to avert your eyes from reality and push all the responsibility onto others.”

The airship rocked violently and titled. The propellers began spinning desperately. At last, the Plantaginesta lifted off from the land.

“Alright, this is good! Let’s secure some more altitude at maximum speed and knock off as many of these guys clinging to the walls as we can! After that, we’ll have to count on the young ladies!”

Sounds of despair seeped into the ship from outside. They seemed to be drawing closer.

“A few have infiltrated the ship! Evacuate everyone to a safe place!” Grick yelled.

“I-I dont’ know what to do! I’m a technician, not an officer! This is out of my specialty!”

“Oh, is that so!?”

If the First Technician planned on abandoning his duty, it only made things more convenient for Grick. He grabbed the voice transmitter and broadcast his orders to the entire airship. Of course, this was outside of Grick's specialty as well, but if no one took charge they had no chance at survival.

The hands of the clock pointed to 6:34 p.m.

Kutori still hadn't regained consciousness. After fainting back when they were escaping from the underground labyrinth, she had never opened her eyes once. They had sprinted onto the ship and into the clinic, grabbed the doctor, and told him to do anything at all to wake her up.

Of course, nothing worked.

After all, she wasn't suffering from any kind of regular illness, and she didn't have any visible wounds. How could they have expected the doctor to treat someone who looked perfectly fine on the outside? He did discover slight internal bleeding near the chest, but that was probably caused by Willem's interference, and not directly related to her coma.

Willem sat on the floor beside the sleeping Kutori, his head buried in his hands. Now that it had come to this, there likely wouldn't be any meaning in trying to repair Lapidem Sybilus. The sword had the ability to maintain its user's mental and physical condition, but it first required the user to actually activate it with Venom.

"... what am I doing…"

Willem groaned. He had wanted to make her happy. But since she woke up from that first coma, what had he been able to do? What had he done to guide her towards her dreams? He couldn't think of a single thing.

It's not like you really care about her anyways, do you?

Willem felt he heard a voice whispering to him from a dark place deep down in his heart.

She only caught your attention because she was the wielder of Seniolis. You didn't care about Kutori. The girl you wanted to save was Leila. The thing you wanted to protect was your promise with Almaria. Since you failed at both of those, you tried to trick yourself by putting yourself in a similar situation.

No. I cared for Kutori.

You realized you would never be able to make her happy, didn't you? Seniolis' choice is a binding curse. Once she picked it up, her fate was determined. There was never any way out from the start.

No. No. No. She could've found happiness. I was going to help her.

You were saved by the fact that she was a mere child. You could talk to her without truly looking her in the eye. You could maintain distance. You could give without taking anything. That allowed you to keep clinging onto those things so precious to you which you know are long gone.

No. No. No. No. I, I just… I just…

Oh, look at me, I'm trying so hard. But it's not my fault I can't get anything done, fate isn't on my side. It's all fate's fault, not mine! Boo hoo! Of course no one's going to blame you if you're opponent is fate. It's true that nothing you did was incorrect, but--

N--

Like you said, what's correct to you is grossly incorrect to someone else.

The airship trembled wildly. Willem heard Grick's voice over the transmission system ordering everyone to evacuate to a safe space, but he remained still.

"... marry me, huh?" Those words had come out of his mouth just yesterday. "I wonder… what do I really think of her…"

Slowly, Willem stood up. He bent down and lightly touched his lips to Kutori's. A single tear spilled onto the girl's cheek. As he pulled away, he heard a deafening noise of splitting metal. Somewhere closeby, intruders must have found their way inside the ship.

"... haha." With a brief laugh, Willem turned away from Kutori. He even felt a little thankful for the newcomers. Dealing with them would be better than sitting here and thinking worthless thoughts. "Sorry. I've got to go for a bit," he called to the sleeping girl behind his back, then stepped out of the room.

The hands of the clock pointed to 6:35 p.m.

The battle, of course, seemed utterly hopeless. But Lantolq could think of two good things about their current situation.

First, the attacking Teimerre boasted enormous numbers, but each individual wasn't that large. The Teimerre, when killed, do not die. More precisely, at the instant of death they split in two, and only one half dies while the other lives on. That process repeats itself until a certain limit. The fortunate thing was that, as far as Lantolq could tell, none of them were big enough to have a limit of over ten times. A single fairy could handle one with relative ease if they had so few lives.

Second, Lantolq herself felt unusually agile. Her Venom

ignited and flowed into Historia more smoothly than she had ever experienced before. In fact, she felt so light that the pleasant feeling was almost enough to make her forget the gravity of the situation. The cause, she knew, was Second Technician Willem Kumesh's treatment from earlier. At first she suspected he was just making excuses to touch a young female's body, but apparently not. His skills were definitely no joke. Combined with his personality, the type that made Lantolq want to tease him, she felt she might be able to get along with him. She could also understand why Kutori fell for him. If only he weren't an Emnetwyte…

"Three, four!"

Lantolq thrust a finishing blow into the Beast in front of her. Immediately after, she spread her wings and flew a safe distance away from the hordes of Beasts clinging onto the Plantaginesta's hull. Since the Beasts couldn't fly themselves, she could always maintain an advantage by utilizing her wings. The airship also seemed to finally have reached a suitable elevation. The Teimerre which had been using each other's bodies as a ladder to climb up drifted out of reach of the ship and all collapsed to the ground.

"Alright…"

With that, reinforcements from the surface were cut off. All they had to do was clean up the ones already stuck onto the ship. Lantolq looked across the Plantaginesta once more. Almost a third of the bottom part of the ship was completely covered in Teimerre, as if it had taken a trek through a leech infested swamp. The overwhelming number of Beasts, well, she didn't really want to look at them, but they couldn't be ignored. She estimated a total between one hundred and two hundred.

"You're kidding…"

With so many individuals to start with, it didn't matter if each of them could only split ten times. Lantolq, while she felt great, had only just recovered from Venom poisoning. If she continued to overexert herself, she would break eventually. Even with two positive points, the situation was still utterly hopeless.

The hands of the clock pointed to 6:38 p.m.

Be happy! It's the battlefield! Something inside of Willem seemed to whisper to him.

The battlefield. The place where heroes show their bravery. The place to struggle, destroy, and claim victory. Here lies exhilaration. Here lies glory. Here lies tragedy. Fantasy. Reality.

Willem had once desired power to stand on the battlefield. In his new life, unable to stand there any longer, he had suffered bitter

thoughts. His heart had ached at sending his loved ones off to this place. So perhaps he had longed to stand here this whole time. Perhaps he should've rejoiced at finally arriving on the battlefield. After all, isn't that all he desired throughout these long years? To crush his enemy, fight through the pain, and claim victory?

Willem shook his head, attempting to drive away his mind's useless ramblings. Keeping low to the ground, he sprinted down the corridor. A gray something suddenly flew at his side and slashed at his back. Willem ducked even lower, causing the attack to pass over his head. The entire wall had burst apart with such force Willem almost wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. Countless metal fragments from the copper and steel plates which had lined the corridors seconds ago scattered throughout the air. He saw one shard, which had the words 'may Regul Aire forever remain in peace' graffitied onto it, fly by.

Out from where the wall used to stand, *it* revealed itself. It took the form of a large, gray crustacean, with a sturdy shell covering its body and multiple joints in its legs. It slightly resembled a crab, but a real crab wouldn't have over ten legs, and those legs wouldn't be able to stretch out and contract independently.

It was unmistakably a Beast. Willem had heard so much about them, but this was his first time ever seeing one. He thought that encountering one of the creatures might stir up some deep emotions in him, but he didn't feel anything in particular. In front of his eyes was no more than a strangely shaped enemy with enormous power -- and maybe, the final outcome of a former Emnetwyte. That possibility made him waver a little. Just a little. So what if it was once an Emnetwyte? Right now, it was a monster with its fangs pointed towards him. That's all that mattered.

A strong wind blew in from across the destroyed wall. Along with it came three of the Beast's limbs. They lashed out at the wall, the ceiling, and the floor, flailing around wildly in an attempt to crush Willem. He loosened his posture and closed the gap between him and the Beast with agile footwork almost resembling a dance. It was a basic version of a dash method taught in the curved blade techniques of West Garmond. Apparently, if mastered it could transform the user into a haze of heat flowing effortlessly through the sky, but the talentless Willem could never use it as more than a small trick. But that was enough for now. The Beast moved just liked any wild beast. All it possessed was overwhelming strength; it had no skills or complex thought process. With slightly deceptive movements, Willem could easily dodge its attacks.

He arrived right beside the Beast, at a distance so close his breath landed on its gray shell. From up close, he noticed that a strange slimy looking substance covered the Beast's body. *I hope it's not poison* , he thought as he thrust forward his left fist. As his hand flew through the air, it picked up an iron board falling from the collapsing ceiling before driving straight into the root of one of the Beast's legs. Of course, his punch, even with the added force of the iron board, inflicted no damage. It would be stupid to think that a simple fist could harm an enemy who could easily survive a canon bombardment.

Willem lowered his stance, twisted his ankles, rotated his shoulders back, and stored a deep breath in his stomach. That string of movements all connected smoothly together and further empowered his drawn back fist. A point blank punch. It was said that if a master carried out this attack he could split a giant mountain and reverse the flow of a waterfall (probably slightly exaggerated). Willem, being an amateur, couldn't do anything of the sort. At best, he could push the receiver of his punch forward slightly.

But that sufficed. Behind the Beast stood a wide gaping hole where the wall once stood, which the Beast had just carved out itself. In other words, if Willem pushed the Beast slightly forward, it would have nothing left to stand on. And the Beast, not having wings, would then have no way to climb back up once thrown out into the air.

Willem brought his fist forward, successfully pushing the Beast off of the airship. Out amidst the reddening sky, it began falling silently down towards the vast gray wasteland below. After watching it for a little while, Willem relaxed his guard.

"Agh!"

He had pushed his already broken body too far. Intense pain shot through every corner of it, causing Willem to grimace. With both arms, he checked the condition of his wounds. No bones had been broken, and no important joints or tendons had been cut. He could still move. He could still fight. He could remain standing on the battlefield. Willem let out a maniacal laugh.

"I'm surprised," a voice said behind him.

Turning around, Willem spotted blue hair fluttering in the violent wind. "Oh, Lantolq. Glad to see you safe and sound." He smiled.

"All thanks to you, unfortunately. You don't seem to be doing too well yourself, though," Lantolq said bitterly. "You're pushing yourself too hard, aren't you? An already wounded person defeating a Beast with no weapon and without igniting Venom? What kind of

joke is this?"

"Oh, were you watching? How embarrassing."

"Don't play dumb. Geez, you really are -- ah!"

Willem's consciousness suddenly snapped off. The strength in his knees propping his body up crumbled, leaving his body to tilt over towards the large hole in the wall behind him. Right before he fell out into the sky after his fallen opponent, however, Lantolq grabbed his body and shoved it down onto the ground, where the floor of the corridor used to be.

"... sorry." Willem's consciousness flickered back on. "You really saved me there."

"Yes I did. Be thankful. Can you stand?"

Willem attempted to lift himself up, but it was no good. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't put any strength into his knees.

"I guess we have no choice but to rest here for a bit then. I'm a little tired myself…" Lantolq said as she sat up straight. She drew Willem closer, resting his head near her chest.

"W-Whoa there." Willem faltered. Compared to Nephren, who was always hugging Willem and what not, Lantolq had a little more… you know. "Hah. As if a mere child could make me feel anything," he said, half to himself.

"Is that so? I won't ask whether you're saying that seriously or just trying to control yourself, but either way I'm grateful," Lantolq said, and tightened her grip a little.

With his ears near her chest, Willem could clearly hear her rapid heartbeat. "You're all messed up too, aren't you."

"While not as much as you, I did exert myself a little too hard."

Venom relies on the heart's strength to ignite. The consequences reveal themselves soon enough, as the blood flow and heart grow increasingly chaotic. The unstable and irregular pulse he heard in Lantolq was unmistakably the result of extended Venom overusage.

"Can you fix it with that fishy treatment of yours?" Lantolq asked.

Willem shook his head. With his skill, healing an irregular heartbeat directly would be strictly impossible.

"You're more useless than I thought."

"Does that mean you had high expectations of me?"

"Not necessarily…" Lantolq paused for a bit and thought. "Or maybe I did. I knew I couldn't trust or rely on you, but perhaps some part of me was expecting something from you."

Her words reminded Willem of something that dumb lizard had said once. He took it as an insult.

"Do you have any idea what's going on elsewhere? Are Noft and Nephren safe?" he asked.

"I don't know the exact numbers, but I suspect there are roughly ten Beasts remaining. Earlier I saw Noft still alive, but she seemed to be overexerting herself as much as I was. Haven't seen Nephren yet, but I think she's fighting somewhere near the hold."

"I see." Willem thought for a bit. The situation was obviously bleak. The fairies didn't have any trouble fighting the small Beasts one by one, but they were vastly outnumbered. Without any opportunity to rest, the longer the battle dragged on the more the fairies' strength advantage shrinked. "I think I should--"

"No." Lantolq cut him off immediately.

"I didn't even finish speaking yet."

"I could tell from your face that you were going to say something no good. Something like, if the situation is so bad not even opening the gate to the fairy land will solve it, then I'll sacrifice myself and clean everything up. Am I right? You were thinking that doing so would minimize losses, correct?" Willem wished Lantolq would stop reading his mind. "If not, there's no explanation for that stupid smile on your face."

…… am I smiling? Willem wondered. "To you, me dying would be the least painful, wouldn't it?"

"I won't deny that. But having you commit suicide in front of me using one of my friends as an excuse wouldn't be very pleasant."

Kutori still hadn't woken up. Willem was desperately trying to fight a hopeless fight. Apparently, Lantolq was able to figure out that these two were connected.

"I guess." Willem placed his palm on top of Lantolq's head, only to have it swatted away immediately. "The Beasts are growing fewer in number. You keep resting. I'll go take a look at the hold."

"Is that an order?"

"Take it however you want," Willem answered, then ran off.

The hands of the clock pointed to 6:51 p.m.

"Ah!?"

Struck by a forceful blow, Noft was sent flying back. She bounced off the walls and the ceiling like a ball, tearing apart a few pipes, then rolled down towards the end of the corridor before finally stopping. She had put up her Venom defense just in time, judging by the lack of visible wounds on her body. However, as a result of the repeated impacts, her right arm had become numb and refused to

move.

"Ahaha… this is bad."

She stood with trembling feet, staring at the slowly approaching Beast. Continually using Venom without rest for a period of time essentially has the same effect as sprinting at full speed for that same period of time. Forced to endure intense battles one after another, Noft's stamina had quickly reached its limit. But her efforts had not been in vain. The number of enemies was clearly decreasing. Just a little longer, and the exhausting fighting would be over. She could end it.

But once it was over, once victory was theirs -- what would happen then?

The hands of the clock pointed to 6:59 p.m.

In the walls of the airship's hold, bolstered by layer upon layer of steel plating, a large hole popped open. The ship shook violently, causing the worn out clock to fall down. With a small crash, it collided with the ground and its face cracked. After its long life, the anachronistic clock had finally ticked its last tick.

Watching from the side, anyone could clearly tell that Nephren's movements were dulled. All non combatants, in other words everyone except the fairies, had evacuated to the hold. Their presence attracted countless Beasts, and Nephren alone fought them off.

She fought a battle of endurance in which everything around her worked to her disadvantage. The petite Nephren hardly had any stamina, and she didn't have enough experience to be able to maintain focus with so many enemies. Furthermore, in the closed off room, she couldn't make use of her wings or nimbleness. Her sword, Insania, was large and heavy, yet still had less range than the Beasts' limbs. She had no choice but to go all in with each attack, heavily taxing her stamina and focus. As time passed, Nephren's movements grew less sharp and the Beasts only increased in number and vigor. She had been driven back to the center of the hold.

"Everyone that can't fly, grab onto something!!"

Grick's voice roared to life through the voice transmitter pipes. Meanwhile, in the control room, Grick was busy piloting the ship. Overriding a few control mechanisms, he forcibly turned the rudder. The ship moaned loudly and began to tilt. The bow was raised up, while the stern pointed down towards the ground.

The Teimerre gathered in the hold to hunt the survivors began slipping on the tilted floor. At the same time, Nephren used her

sword to cut open one of the large cargo gates. Various goods stored in the hold -- food for the journey home, relics dug up on the land -- all slid out into the air. The Beasts tried to transform their limbs to better latch onto the floor and walls, but the barrage of wooden boxes raining down upon them pushed them off.

One Teimerre split its body in two as it fell. And then, using the other half as a stepping stone, one half took a big leap up and tried to grab Nephren with its long claws.

“Nice try!”

A brave crew member hurled a barrel of oil at the monster. Not only did it hit its mark, it also spilled slippery cooking oil everywhere. The claws aiming to pierce Nephren’s stomach missed and only lightly scratched the back of her head. The Beast then transformed its limbs again, this time into thorny, shelled crustacean legs. It tried to latch onto the floor with them, but the oil prevented it. Soon enough, the Beast rejoined its companions out in the sky.

The crew members let out a cheer. “Good work, young lady!” Someone shouted words of gratitude to Nephren.

At that very same moment, the fairy soldier’s body began slipping on the slanted floor. She had long surpassed her limits. She had somehow finished the fight fueled by pure willpower alone. And now, with that last attack from the Beast and the sense of relief at the battle’s end, that last thread of willpower had been cut.

“Miss!!” A few crew members let out screams. Some of them tried to crawl along the floor towards her.

“... don’t… come…”

Nephren’s body was hot as an inferno, yet at the same time cold as ice. Needless to say, she had ignited too much Venom. She had turned her back on life and abused that terrible power, knowing that each step took her closer to death. Now, there was only one possible outcome which awaited her: berserk. The immense, unchecked power emanating from her would blow away everything in the area with enough force to destroy a large Teimerre all at once in an overwhelming manifestation of destruction.

“Wait there! I’m coming!” A Frogger crew member yelled as he crawled inch by inch towards Nephren.

She couldn’t be saved by them. That thought budged Nephren’s body just a hair backwards.

“Miss!?”

With a light kick off the floor, Nephren jumped into the vast empty sky and began her descend to the ground below.

Out of the corner of his eye, through a crack in the hull, Willem

spotted an unconscious Nephren in free fall.

"Wha--"

Willem's mind turned blank. Within a split second, he had already jumped out into the roaring winds. Forcing open his injured eyes, he spotted Nephren and followed in her path. She had let go of Insania and simply continued to fall, unable to control her body any longer. Around her, a group of Beasts which had likely fallen out of the ship just before her attempted to close in, awkwardly paddling through the air.

Well, this is it , Willem thought. With a Demolishing Nightingale Dash, he lunged towards Insania and grabbed hold of the sword. Ignoring the fierce pain pulsing through his body, he ignited Venom and attempted to activate the sword. It was no use. Willem didn't have the talent to wield a high class Kaliyon. But he already knew that. Fighting against the intense air resistance, he slowly stretched his hand towards the center of the blade.

"Start maintenance!!"

The cracks in the blade widened and light poured out from them as Insania burst apart. Willem then grabbed the crystal which served as the core of the entire sword and ripped it out, severing the connecting spell lines. The backbone circuit, now incomplete, began to overheat as it failed to withstand its own internal pressure. The sword known as Insania was already no more. All that remained was a mass of raw, turbulent power.

In total, there were thirteen Beasts surrounding Nephren. And in a few seconds, they, along with Willem and Nephren, would all smack into the ground and perish instantly.

"Get away from her!!" With a beast-like roar, Willem flew into the pack with a second Demolishing Nightingale Dash.

Part 4: The Happiest Girl in the World

When she came to, the girl found herself standing amidst shadowy ruins. A familiar child on the verge of tears stood before her.

What's wrong, Elq? The girl's memory vaguely recalled that name. *Did you have a bad dream?*

Elq's body suddenly shivered. "... Kutori…" She looked towards the girl and murmured someone's name.

The girl wondered whose name it was. It sounded strangely familiar. After a moment of thought, she realized that it was, in fact, her own name. A nostalgic feeling overcame the girl, as if she were

meeting an old acquaintance. Hearing it now, it sounded like a rather weird name. It was hard to remember, hard to say, and, most importantly, not very charming.

"Sorry," Elq said.

For what?

"I knew it would turn out like this. I knew it would be rough."

Ah, don't worry about it. In fact, I should be thanking you. Because of you, because you kept your eyes closed, I was able to keep my promise. I was able to return home to the place I longed for. Although it looks like I lost a lot of things I didn't want to lose…

"... Kutori."

I have one wish. This is probably going to be my last one.

"But…"

I can't remember precisely, but I feel like there's someone I want to save. There are feelings I want to convey.

"No matter what?"

No matter what.

"This time, you'll really be gone, you know?"

I mean, I'm already pretty much gone. Besides, I understand now. That's just who I am, right? That's the real reason I was chosen by Seniolis, isn't it?

"....."

I understand everything now. But still I'm asking you. Please. Just one more time. Let me go back.

A red haired girl slowly raised herself up from bed.

"Umm…"

Where am I? Who am I?

She couldn't remember a thing, as if a heavy fog blanketed her mind, or more like it had been clogged with mud. With a loud rumbling, the whole world seemed to shake violently. From somewhere off in the distance, she heard the clanging sounds of metal clashing upon metal. *Is this a battlefield?*

The girl found her way to the exit and stepped out into a narrow hallway. She wandered around aimlessly until she found a place with a nice view. The wall had almost completely been peeled away, revealing the vast sky beyond. Much of the vivid blue had already darkened to a light purple, and some of that had already given way to a deeper red. Twilight.

"Kutori…?" A voice almost like a groan sounded from behind her.

Turning around, she spotted a girl collapsed onto the dirty hallway floor, lying with her legs and arms spread out. A large,

intense amount of Venom seemed to emanate from her, but the heavy wounds all over her body must have rendered her unable to move.

"Are you dumb? This is dangerous… if you're awake, go hide somewhere."

Do I know this person? the girl thought. The person on the floor seemed to recognize her. The girl, however, hadn't the slightest recollection of the new face. Perhaps that fragment of her mind had long since disappeared.

Through the large hole in the wall, outside in the rolling shades of blue and red, the girl spotted the tiny figure of a person. With every second, it grew smaller and smaller, threatening to disappear at any moment.

"Ah."

The girl remembered. It was him. She couldn't recall his name, but he was a very important person. She couldn't be certain, but she vaguely got the feeling that he was the type of person to needlessly pile more trouble and work onto his own plate. But anyway, why was he currently in freefall? She was pretty sure that he didn't have wings or anything of the sort, so if he continued on his course, would he not collide with the ground and perish?

"Guess I have no choice."

A nice looking sword was just lying around nearby, so the girl picked it up. The name engraved onto the hilt read 'Desperatio'. Severed Hope. A fitting name, the girl thought.

"Stop. Don't go," the one on the floor said. "You don't need to fight anymore. You don't need to sacrifice yourself. We're here to fight for you. So--" Perhaps because her lungs had been wounded, she needed to pause to let out a heavy cough. "-- If you don't need to fight anymore, then don't. You're finally able to chase happiness, so do it. If you don't, what are we fighting for?" She desperately pleaded. It looked like her consciousness was beginning to waver, probably from over ignition of Venom.

"Sorry. But I'll never be able to become happy now," the girl said as she began pouring Venom into Desperatio. The blade accepted the power smoothly, as if it had always been a part of the girl's body. "Because I realized. I've already been happy for a long time now."

Then, after showing the stranger a cheerful smile, the girl took one step over the remains of the wall and dove out into the endless sky.

Her hair fluttered wildly. The Venom inside her body was

already overflowing at full potential.

Lots of burning books falling. A snake swimming through flames. A crumbling silver moon.

Strange images and voices filled the girl's head. Fragments of her mind were disappearing one after another.

A ship crossing through the stars. A row of coffins. A broken dome.

Everything was leaving. Fun moments. Painful moments. The girl could feel her mind steadily fading into a plain, white piece of paper.

Good luck.

A smile naturally spread across the girl's face.

Willem now really regretted never completing his study of air dashing techniques. Well of course, it's questionable whether he would be able to produce results even if he did finish training, given his lack of talent, but he couldn't stop thinking 'what if?'.

He had driven away the surrounding Beasts and secured the unconscious Nephren in his arms. Then, with the absolute maximum amount of Venom his body could ignite, he had managed to negate a large amount of the fall impact. Nevertheless, the collision with the ground messed his body up pretty badly. Now, he was simply rolling around on the ashen sand, still holding Nephren. The friction from the said scratched away at his skin, splitting it and then biting at the exposed flesh underneath.

"Agh… ah…"

Finally, he came to a stop. He managed to cough up a nasty mixture of air and blood from his crushed lungs. A sense of numbness had overtaken every part of his body. That was probably something to be thankful for. If his pain receptors were working properly, he would probably go insane. That's how much damage had been inflicted on his body.

This is bad .

Willem had long surpassed the point where he could make one last desperate effort. Most likely, he would never be able to move again. Unfortunately, however, the immediate danger hadn't left at all. The Beasts he didn't kill during their fall were beginning to rouse themselves from the sand surrounding them. On top of that, the Beasts left behind on the ground when the airship took off were beginning to draw closer. They probably numbered no less than a hundred.

Something. There must be something.

His consciousness felt like it could cut off at any second, but for

the time being he managed to barely keep it connected and desperately force his thoughts to run. But nothing popped into his mind. All possible situations lead to the same ending: their death. He clenched his teeth, of which almost half were broken.

I can't… I can't give up on their future now.

"And then you'll stay by their side and protect them forever, right?"

His master's smile suddenly found its way into Willem's head. *Shut up! This is not the time to be remembering you.* The image, however, didn't go away so easily.

"Rejoice, Quasi Brave! You will never ever be able to become a Regal Brave."

When he had been told that, Willem kind of half listened and didn't think much of it, but what did his master mean? To become a Regal Brave required a special background. Willem, however, had absolutely nothing unique about his birth, raising, or destiny. And he knew that all too well. So why did his master feel the need to say it again?

Who cares about that now!?

One of the Beasts closed in right in front of his eyes. Willem wanted to fight back, but he couldn't even lift a single finger. It was over. A small bud of resignation began to sprout inside of him. At the same moment, his consciousness began to fade rapidly.

I'm sorry, Nephren. I couldn't protect you.

I'm sorry, Kutori. I couldn't bring you happiness.

And… and…

In the split second before total darkness swallowed Willem's consciousness, he thought he saw someone land right next to them.

Part 5: Dream's End

She felt as if she were swimming through a dream.

A helpless feeling of impatience enveloped her limbs.

Time stretched out thinner and thinner, while her consciousness accelerated faster and faster.

Things were lost upon each swing of her right arm.

A beast vaporized as her blazing torrent of Venom swallowed it up.

The 'Kutori' still barely remaining inside of the girl faded away bit by bit.

There were memories she didn't want to forget, but she could no longer recall what they were. She had a future she didn't want to

give up on, but she could no longer picture the very concept of future. Everything was gone. She had let it all go.

But she didn't regret it. Or at least, she didn't think that she was regretting it. She didn't know anymore. Already, not enough memories remained inside her for her to tell.

She lost track of time. No one would ever know how long she had continued fighting.

But still, the seemingly endless battle eventually came to a close.

The corpses of 715 Beasts lay around her, all cut apart, crushed to bits, or burned to ashes. And that was all. Confirming that no more Beasts remained around her, the girl finally stopped moving.

The wind stood still.

Her red hair, so vivid as if it were ablaze, glowed brightly in the moonlight.

-- Someone was lying collapsed on the ground.

Who is that? the girl thought.

With some effort, she twisted her neck to take a look.

Enveloped in the darkness of night, a black haired young man lay on the sand with a young girl held tightly to his chest.

"Ah…"

The girl raised her head and thought about saying something, but her throat no longer functioned after such wild breathing during the battle. And besides, she didn't even know what to say.

The young man looked as if he were about to burst into tears. For some reason, the girl found that sight saddening.

Who is he?

Surely, he used to be someone very precious to her. But she couldn't remember. She couldn't even feel a sense of loss.

The girl got the feeling that she wanted the man to smile. She wanted him to laugh and tease her. But at the same time, she wanted him to cry. She wanted him to feel for her now empty self so much that he would be moved to tears. *I'm a terrible person* , the girl thought. *I really am.*

The young man's eyes opened ever so slightly and looked towards the girl. A sudden happiness welled up inside her chest. She could convey to him. After losing everything, even losing sight of who she was, one last wish still remained inside her tattered heart. There were words she wanted convey to him before she disappeared for good.

Thank you .

She moved her lips to form those words, then, with every ounce of strength left inside her broken body, she smiled.

After a brief moment, the girl's consciousness terminated, never to return again.

The report detailing all the losses became so thick it could almost constitute an entire book on its own. Given the enormous airship, it only seemed natural. Besides the value of the actual goods on board, the various permissions it carried, for example to fly on a certain route or anchor at a certain dock, were also quite costly. Especially since the airship had been cleared to descend to the land, you wouldn't be able to count the number of necessary permissions with all your fingers and toes (assuming you are a race which has two feet and two hands, each containing five fingers).

But despite the extremely complicated nature of the situation, the report which reached the fairy warehouse was short and simple. Second Technician Willem Kumesh and his secretary had become missing in action during a sudden conflict at Ground Level Ruins K96-MAL. In addition, the following equipment was lost in the battle.

Dug Weapon Insania

Dug Weapon Desperatio

Dug Weapon user Nephren Ruq Insania.

Due to Second Technician Willem Kumesh's lack of a family, his assets will be added to the Orlandri Trading Company's 4th Warehouse's operating budget, as he requested...

Chapter 5: A Now Distant Dream

Long ago, when a certain young girl had just been ‘born’.

Deep inside a dark forest on the fringes of the 94th Floating Island.

The girl was crying in front of an old, moss covered stone monument. She cried and wailed with a loud voice that resounded

throughout the forest. She felt sad. She didn't quite know why, but for whatever reason an overwhelming feeling of loss had welled up from deep inside her chest and refused to go away.

"How is she crying so loud!?" A fairy soldier, who had just finished up a battle nearby, laughed as she covered her ears.

"She must be carrying a lot of emotions from her previous life!" another fairy soldier, also covering her ears, replied.

The two exchanged glances before moving in closer to the child. They squatted down to match the girl's eye level, then spoke to her in gentle voices. "Good evening. How are you doing?"

Waaaaaahhh.

"... she's not listening."

"No she is not. In times like these, you just gotta do this." One of the fairy soldiers embraced the crying girl in her arms. The girl, unable to breathe very well with her face buried in someone else's chest, soon stopped crying and, after a short moment of flailing about, settled down quietly. "See? Just like that."

"... did you kill her?"

"She's just sleeping. Listen."

Upon listening closely, the two fairies could hear faint snoring coming from the little girl, the volume of which couldn't even compare with her crying from just a few seconds earlier. The wind blew by, softly rustling the trees of the forest.

"Welcome, little one, to this half apocalyptic, restless, completely unsavable world."

"Doesn't sound like a very pleasant welcome."

"It's fine. As elders, it's our duty and our right to tell children the harsh reality."

"Some elder you are…"

"I know, I'm great."

As the two went back and forth, they peered into the sleeping girl's face.

"I wonder what kind of dream she's having." One of the fairies lightly poked the girl's squishy cheeks.

"Who knows? That's the one thing that only she knows."

"Ah. She just smiled. Maybe it's a happy dream."

"That would be nice."

Half a month had passed since news of the incident at Ground Level Ruins K96-MAL reached the fairy warehouse. There were some who cried, some who pretended to be okay, some who were shocked, some who were bewildered, and some who disappeared to hunt bears… They all took half a month to do what they needed in

order to cope with their feelings.

"Agh!"

As the sun sank low in the sky over the grounds of the fairy warehouse, Tiat Shiba Ignareo continued running by herself.

"Pushing yourself too hard won't help you at all, ya know?"

She paid no attention to Aiseia, focusing solely on running the next step forward. Swinging back and forth in front of Tiat's chest was a silver brooch, still slightly too big for her.

"She sure is working hard," Naigrat said as she walked up to the two of them.

"Too hard, I think," Aiseia answered.

When the news arrived, Naigrat had cut her hair. To the little ones, who wouldn't stop asking why, she vaguely answered that she just wanted a change. Aiseia, of course, knew that there was more. Naigrat had gone to the harbor district and released her hair into the wind, scattering the severed strands down onto the ground below. In the ancient Troll tradition, two people eating a part of each other is a ceremony which ties their hearts together for eternity.

"I think she's still having trouble accepting Kutori's death. She's trying desperately to bring herself closer to Kutori," Aiseia said.

"Really brings me back. Kutori used to be the exact same a long time ago," Naigrat said with a smile. "There was someone like an older sister to her, and when she passed away, Kutori used that grief as a catalyst to grow incredibly strong."

"So the world keeps on spinning just as it always has, huh?" Aiseia said, then lay down on the ground. "Noft and Lantolq get out of the hospital tomorrow, right? Are we gonna have a welcome home party?"

"That's right. It's unfortunate that some of them couldn't make it home, but we have to give the ones that did a proper welcome."

"So grown up…" Aiseia flailed her legs about and gazed up at the sky. "I guess I'll have to learn to be like that soon enough, huh?" she murmured as her eyes began to glisten.

"I can't accept this," Noft grumbled as she sat on top of a bed of white sheets.

After surviving the battle, Noft and Lantolq had been taken by the ship's crew members to a treatment facility on another floating island. They both suffered from weak life forces as a result of igniting too much Venom. For a few days, their condition was so horrible that it wouldn't have been surprising if they died at any moment. Only recently did they regain consciousness.

"What's that supposed to mean? 'I've already been happy for a

long time now'. Did she think I would accept that for an answer? Then she just jumps off and everyone lives happily ever after? No!"

"Noft, you're too loud," Lantolq responded coldly as she flipped through a local newspaper. "You can't see or understand someone else's happiness. Trying to decide what happiness means for someone or denying their happiness is nothing more than foolish selfishness."

Noft flailed around in frustration.

"... but still…" *Happiness is often brought about by that foolish selfishness* , Lantolq thought to herself.

Lantolq never really liked Kutori. However, she also didn't particularly hate her either. So if she really was happy as she claimed to be in her final moments, then perhaps that really was a happy ending.

Up above, the winter sun finally dipped below the horizon. As if taking over for the now absent sky blue, the stars began their gentle twinkling.

Familiar scents: freshly baked bread filled with nuts, scrambled eggs, crisp salad, freshly squeezed orange juice. The usual smells of morning. The smells of the beginning of a new day which his body knew so thoroughly.

"Nngh…"

Willem stirred slightly.

"Ah, are you finally awake?"

He heard the soft pattering noise of a pair of slippers walking across the floor. Similar to the smells, those footsteps were also quite familiar and well known to his body. The usual footsteps.

Willem opened his eyes. He saw the faded plaster ceiling. "Where--"

It looked very similar to a certain nostalgic place. It very closely resembled that place which he once longed to return home to. Feelings of joy began to slowly well up from the bottom of his heart. But something else within his heart strongly denied those feelings. It couldn't be real. It wasn't possible.

"Almaria."

"Hm?"

Willem called out a name, and received a response. A thick blanket of fog still lingered over his mind.

"Was I sleeping?"

"You didn't look too well. Did you have a scary dream or something?"

All over the building, little presences began to stir. The smells

of morning affecting all those in the orphanage equally. Pretty soon, all the children would emerge from their rooms and gather downstairs.

Was I having a dream?

If that were true, it was a pretty realistic dream. Within that dream, he had been on the verge of death many times. He had lost much, gained more, then lost again. He had grieved so much he had run out of tears. And he had rejoiced so much that he had run out of smiles.

But a dream, no matter how brilliant, is in the end just a dream. Eventually, it must end, only to melt away in the morning light and drift out of memory. Perhaps Willem's recollections of his dream, as precious as they were, would soon sink into some place deep within his mind and never be remembered again.

Isn't that a good thing? A voice from within seemed to whisper to him. *Forget it all* .

"... I can't do that." Still not fully awake, Willem swatted away those thoughts. Right now, he needed to wash his face and clear his mind fog.

As he raised himself from the sofa, a small girl rolled off his stomach.

"Ow…" A gray haired young girl sat up on the floor. Rubbing her eyes, she took a look around. "Huh? Where is this? Why… am I here?"

Willem recognized that girl. He remembered her. Nephren Ruq Insania, a Leprechaun. A resident of the fairy warehouse. One of the guardians of Regul Aire.

"..... ah."

The lid on the box had been lifted. Once he remembered one thing, everything else came flooding out. Countless images and names ran through his head.

"Nephren…?" Willem said, trying to fight back the deep confusion overtaking him.

She wasn't there, five hundred years ago on the land. She wasn't even alive back then.

If Willem had stayed a little more calm, he might have noticed immediately. Beside his chest, a single small metal fragment glowed faintly.

It was the language Talisman which Willem never ended up returning to Grick, an ancient treasure said to convey will itself using language as an intermediary. Once activated, the user no longer needs to supply any Venom. It translates every message it receives,

regardless of what the user wants to actually listen to. The convenient little device which had helped Willem greatly when he first awoke on Regul Aire, before he learned the common language, was beginning to do its job again.

Willem, being an experienced warrior, should have recognized immediately what the glowing light signified. What the true nature of this new world was. He could have seen through it all right away, but…

"Nnn… huh…?"

"Father? What's wrong? Father?"

Nephren's confused voice. Almaria's footsteps. Willem couldn't hear any of it. He couldn't see anything. He couldn't think about anything. His senses seemed to cease functioning, leaving him in his own little world of pure white nothingness. All he could feel was the warmth of the tears streaming down his cheeks.